

























MODERN WOMEN POETS  
OF SPANISH AMERICA

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# MODERN WOMEN POETS OF SPANISH AMERICA

THE PRECURSORS - DELMIRA AGUSTINI  
GABRIELA MISTRAL - ALFONSINA STORNI  
JUANA DE IBARBOUROU

By

SIDONIA CARMEN ROSENBAUM



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MODERN WOMEN PORTRAYS  
OF SPANISH AMERICA

THE WITNESS - THE MARY AGUIRRE  
GABRIELA MISTRAL - ALONSO FERNANDEZ  
JUAN DE BARRAL

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## PREFACE

The feminine poetic production in Spanish America during the present century is an interesting literary trend which has a clear and precise unity in its chronological limits and historical development. There are two distinct periods in the evolution of feminine poetry in the last forty years, which correspond to the two phases of poetry in general during that period: one, that of its initiation and creation, which fits within the so-called "post-modernist" phase (1905-1918); and another, that of its development and diffusion, which coincides with the multiple and diverse new tendencies and *isms* through which poetry has passed from 1918 to date. This second period is represented by a great number of women writers—who may be counted by the hundreds—some of decided value, but whose work is as yet incomplete, and whose poetic personality is not quite fully defined. The first period, on the other hand, although comparatively recent, already belongs to the past, and the work—and, at times, even the life—of the writers who represent it, is virtually terminated. The women who initiated and created this new poetry are few, and some have a distinct, and, at all events, an unusual personality. They are considered among the best writers—men or women—of their time, and of all time, and have definitely become a part of the literary history of Spanish America. Furthermore, each of these (Delmira Agustini, Gabriela Mistral, Alfonsina Storni and Juana de Ibarbourou) merits a special study that should be made before attempting that of all their contemporaries as a whole—contemporaries of lesser importance, and those who have followed them at a later period.

In this work I have proposed to study, mainly, that writer who was the first in point of time, and second to none in her poetic worth: Delmira Agustini. In order to place her within the proper historical perspective, I have felt it pertinent and necessary to give, as introduction, some idea of the work of the women poets who preceded her, and also of her influence on modern feminine literature. In doing the latter, I have seen that rather than to determine the influence itself, it was important to establish her relation to the other great women poets who appeared immediately afterwards with distinct and different personalities. Delmira, undoubtedly, had an influence upon them all, setting the example as well as giving the initial impulse. But they cannot, by any manner of means, be considered merely her followers or imitators. The other three major poetesses mentioned were chosen because they have an indubitable originality that makes them differ from Delmira Agustini and from each other. With the object of becoming better acquainted with Delmira, therefore, I



have deemed it important to characterize the others sufficiently to show not only their similarities to the Uruguayan poetess, but also the differences between them. Consequently, I have devoted a study to each, not as extensive as they would merit were they to be treated singly, but ample and detailed enough to give an idea of their worth and particular significance. Thus, until the day when each of these poetesses is studied as the central theme of a monographic work, I hope to have given here a preliminary sketch of the work of the Spanish American women poets of the first part of the twentieth century. The second period should be studied separately, and with a somewhat different method, because there is so vast a number of women poets "in the making" whom one ought to study in their process of development.

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## INTRODUCTION

This century is significant in the history of Spanish American letters in that it marks the beginning of a new type of feminine literature. It is no longer the effort of a woman of exceptional talent—who breaks the bonds of sex and tradition—that brings her to the fore. It is, rather, the collective achievement of a group of women, too numerous to be considered “exceptions.” Several of these rank among the best writers of the Continent, and no one judging their literary production would consider it in the light that Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s heroine complained of in *Aurora Leigh*: “not as mere work, but as *mere woman’s work*” . . .

This flowering of feminine literature in Hispano-America coincides with the triumph of Feminism everywhere. And one could, perhaps, assume that this literature was, in one form or another, feminist in character. But although that movement which, among other things, favored more widespread educational opportunities for women, was undoubtedly responsible for their general awakening, for their greater participation in all social activities—one of which is literature—there is in the work of these writers, almost without exception, no political implication whatsoever. For Feminism was merely the driving force—never the doctrine—that guided their written expression. They used their newly-won freedom for expressing their thoughts more openly, for giving vent to their emotions—womanly thoughts and emotions that had, perhaps, long lain dormant, merely awaiting an opportunity to be freely articulated.

Most of these women poets, novelists, essayists, therefore, are not feminists. Not because they have been in any way inhibited—or coerced—but because the feminist movement, which waxed strongest in countries of Nordic and Protestant tradition, never really took root in Spanish America. Its character there, as in Spain, has always seemed *assumed* and *alien*. For whereas in England, Germany, the United States, where Industrialism flourished, women, forced to leave the home, were more open and alert to ideas of “liberation”, and the “woman question” reached the proportions of revolt, in the Latin countries the feminine cry for liberty was much fainter. And so, in spite of the hold that Feminism has had on certain groups, woman as a whole in Spanish America cannot be said to have fully assimilated all its elements. Spanish and Catholic by tradition, she is diametrically opposed to the Nordic Protestant who represents, perhaps, the truest type of “new woman.”

If these Latin American women have not fought for freedom—as most of them have not—it is not because they were in any way held back. There never was any opposition to the “woman question” there because,



as we have said, it never took sufficient hold to be considered a menace. The women who have felt the need to "emerge from their traditional shell," as some would put it, have done so freely, and in no way do they differ from the modern woman elsewhere. They are represented in every aspect of social—and even political—life, and the woman of worth is held in great esteem. The number of those active and outstanding has undoubtedly increased considerably since the turn of the century, because of the new social status of woman. Yet they are only doing in greater numbers and with more ease what they have always done, for the history of Spanish America shows no dearth of women who, virtually since the Conquest, have distinguished themselves in numberless ways.

\*

Women were instrumental in the Conquest itself.<sup>1</sup> The Indian *Malinche*<sup>2</sup>—known as Doña Marina after her conversion to the faith of the conquistadores—served as interpreter to Cortés, whose titanic task was, undoubtedly, lightened by her constant and tireless aid, her counsel and her love. She was one of the twenty maidens included in the gift by which an astute Indian chief hoped to win the favor of the Conqueror, and was, at that time, about fourteen years old. She was at first assigned by Cortés to his aide, Alonso Hernández Portocarrero<sup>3</sup>, because it was not until after his return from an expedition that he became aware of her intelligence, usefulness and physical charm. Her knowledge of the two main Indian tongues, Mayan and Aztec, was invaluable,<sup>4</sup> for Aguilar, the official interpreter, knew only Mayan. Cortés' wife was in Cuba, and Malinche, besides being most important to him in his dealings with the Indians, also gave him the comfort and affection he needed—and a son, Martín Cortés,<sup>5</sup> who was to die an early, tragic death, but who, nonetheless, left in Mexico an illustrious line of descendants, proud to trace their ancestry to the "Malinches": Cortés and Doña Marina.

Inés Suárez<sup>6</sup> valorously aided her lover, Don Pedro de Valdivia, and remained at his side throughout his turbulent conquest of Chile. He spoke

<sup>1</sup> See J. B. Terán, "La mujer y la familia en la conquista de América." In *El nacimiento de la América Española*, Tucumán, Argentina, 1927, pp. 71-92.

<sup>2</sup> See the modern biographies: G. A. Rodríguez, *Doña Marina*, México, 1935; F. Gómez de Orozco, *Doña Marina, la dama de la Conquista*, México, 1942.

<sup>3</sup> . . . "y Cortés las repartió a cada capitán la suya, y a esta doña Marina, como era de buen parecer y entremetida y desenvuelta, dió a Alonso Hernández Puerto Carrero . . . que era muy buen caballero." (Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, 1928, vol. I, p. 111.)

<sup>4</sup> "Doña Marina sabía la lengua de Guazacualco, que es la propia de Méjico, y sabía la de Tabasco, como Jerónimo de Aguilar sabía la de Yucatán y Tabasco, que es todo una. Entendíanse bien, y el Aguilar lo declaraba en castilla a Cortés . . . He querido declarar esto porque sin ir doña Marina no podíamos entender la lengua de la Nueva España y Méjico." (*Ibid.*, p. 116).

<sup>5</sup> . . . "y desde que fué a Castilla el Puerto Carrero estuvo la doña Marina con Cortés, e hobo allí un hijo que se dijo Martín Cortés." (*Ibid.*, p. 111).

<sup>6</sup> See Stella Burke May, *The Conqueror's Lady: Inés Suárez*, New York, Farrar & Rinehart, 1930; A. Vicuña, *Inés de Suárez*, Santiago de Chile, 1941.

feelingly of her faithfulness, her companionship, her abnegation, her strength and her courage when, in 1544, he rewarded her with an *encomienda*.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, Orellana was accompanied from Spain by his young wife on his second expedition up the Amazon; and, later, along the same river, the mistress of Pedro de Ursúa and the daughter of Lope de Aguirre followed them to their tragic destiny. These are but a few examples of the rôle played in the Conquest by women—Indian or Spanish. The names of some are duly recorded in history; but there were countless others, anonymous, unsung—like so many of the conquistadores themselves.

Later, when Spain settled down to rule the lands it had conquered, many high offices—including viceroyships—were held by women. Some of them succeeded their husbands or fathers; others became governors or *adelantados* by special appointment of the Crown, or by the election of the *Cabildo*. Thus Doña María de Toledo wisely governed the Antilles in place of her husband, Don Diego Colón; Doña Juana de Zárate was given the title of *Adelantado* of Chile; the governorship of the Isla Margarita was twice entrusted to women: Doña Isabel Manrique and Doña Aldonza de Villalobos. Doña Beatriz de la Cueva ruled Guatemala, after the death of her husband, Don Pedro de Alvarado, by election of the *Cabildo*, and inspired such affection in the people that when she so tragically perished in the flood that followed the memorable volcanic eruption that destroyed the capital, the public demonstration of mourning and grief far exceeded that which had been accorded to the former captain general. Doña Catalina Montejó succeeded her father in the *adelantamiento* of Yucatán; the wife of Hernando de Soto governed the Island of Cuba, while Doña Isabel de Barreto was made admiral—perhaps the

<sup>1</sup> "Vos doña Ines Suarez venistes conmigo a estas provincias a servir en ellas a su Majestad, pasando muchos trabajos i fatigas, así por la largueza del camino como por algunos reen-cuentros que tuvimos con indios, i hambres e otras necesidades que ántes de llegar adonde se pobló esta ciudad (la de Santiago) se ofrecieron, que para los hombres eran mui ásperas de pasar, cuanto mas para una mujer tan delicada como vos, i, mas desto, en el alzamiento de la tierra i venida de los indios a esta ciudad, que pusieron en términos de llevársela, i vuestro buen esfuerzo i diligencia fué parte para que no se llevase, porque todos los cristianos que en ella habia tenían que hacer tanto en pelear con los enemigos que no se acordaban de los caciques que estaban presos, que era la causa principal [sic] a que los indios venían, a soltarlos, i vos, sacando de vuestras flacas fuerzas esfuerzo, hicistes que matasen los caciques, poniendo vos las manos en ellos, que fué causa que la mayor parte de los indios se fuesen i dejasen de pelear, viendo muertos a sus señores, que es cierto que si no murieran i se soltaran no quedara español vivo en toda esta dicha ciudad, i los demas que en esta tierra habia con mucho trabajo fueron parte para se poder sustentar en ella, i, despues de muertos los caciques, con ánimo varonil salistes a animar los cristianos que andaban peleando, curando a los heridos i animando a los sanos, diciéndoles palabras para esforzarlos, que fué mucha parte, con lo que les decíades, fuesen adonde estaban hechos fuertes mucha cantidad de indios, muchas veces, e a la oración desbaratados, i desta venida que vinieron los dichos indios a esta ciudad os llevaron cuanto teníades, sin dejaros ni ropa ni otra cosa, en que perdistes mucha cantidad de oro i plata." (Cédula de encomienda dada por Valdivia a doña Ines Suarez en 20 de enero de 1544. Archivo de la Real Audiencia, volumen 310. In D. Amunátegui Solar, *Las encomiendas de indigenas en Chile*, Santiago de Chile, 1910, tomo II, Apuntaciones y documentos, pp. 6-7.)



only one of her sex to have been so distinguished anywhere.<sup>1</sup> The country which had so long benefited from the wise reign of its extraordinary Queen, Isabella, was not averse to giving important political and administrative posts to its women.

Ernest Gruening, in his book *Mexico and its Heritage*<sup>2</sup>, attempts to define the basic differences that lie in the racial background and character of the two Americas by stating that the North American settlers "brought their women," while the conquistadores did not. But this too-generalized belief concerning the absence of Spanish women in the New World is greatly exaggerated. Already on Columbus' second voyage there were several women on his ship. Others followed in every one of the expeditions undertaken by the various conquistadores. Ovando, in 1502, took numerous families to Hispaniola; Diego Colón, in 1509, brought in the retinue of his wife, Doña María de Toledo, niece of the King, a number of young ladies of good families, and it was not long before they all found rich husbands. For as the historian Oviedo says: "there was a great lack of such women from Castile, and although some Christians married 'principal Indians,' there were many others who by no means would take them in marriage because of their incapacity and ugliness."<sup>3</sup>

The wives of the governors and viceroys brought their own nuclei of attendants, and in the retinue of one of them came Juan Juárez Marcaida and his family consisting of his wife and three daughters. It was because of a quarrel over Catalina,<sup>4</sup> the fairest one of the three, that Cortés, the future conqueror of Mexico, was put in prison. Later, when Juárez was sent to Cuba, Cortés followed the family and there was married to Catalina, "although not too willingly." This example of bringing women as companions or attendants was followed by all the ladies of rank. Doña Beatriz de la Cueva, second wife of Don Pedro de Alvarado, took twenty young women to Guatemala where her husband was captain general.

The Crown, for political reasons, and for the purpose of increasing population, favored, facilitated and encouraged feminine immigration. In the *Recopilación de Leyes de los Reinos de las Indias* we find many laws which rendered such immigration virtually imperative as concerned the wives of those who were already in the New World, for it was stated repeatedly that married men whose wives had been left overseas should be forced to go back to Spain after two or three years, and be permitted

<sup>1</sup> C. Fernández Duro, *La mujer española en Indias*, Madrid, Tello, 1902, pp. 24-25.

<sup>2</sup> New York and London, The Century Company, [1928].

<sup>3</sup> . . . "porque en la verdad avia mucha falta de tales mujeres de Castilla, é aunque algunos chrisptianos se casaban con indias principales, avia otros muchos mas que por ninguna cosa las tomáran en matrimonio, por la incapacidad e fealdad dellas." (Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia general y natural de las Indias*, Madrid, Imprenta de la Real Academia de la Historia, 1851, Libro IV, capítulo I, p. 97).

<sup>4</sup> See F. Fernández del Castillo, *Doña Catalina Juárez Marcaida, primera esposa de Hernán Cortés y su familia*. México, 1920.

to return only if they brought them back with them. Other laws stipulated that men who did not send for their wives within a specified time must be exiled or imprisoned. In 1530, Charles V made a law which ruled that no married man be allowed to embark to the Indies without his wife, even though he were a viceroy or a governor.

But if it is true that most of the women who were permitted to embark went to join their husbands, there were many unmarried ones, and even widows, who became much sought after—a veritable boon for bachelors who preferred marrying women of their own race. Yet, often, for lack of others, they did choose “women of the land,” for it was advantageous for a man to marry. Public offices, preferences in the *repartimientos* and *encomiendas*—in the allotments of land and Indians—and exemptions from certain burdensome taxes were the reward. Married men came second only to the conquistadores themselves, and the conquistadores who were married were the recipients of the highest offices and privileges.

The woman, then—white or Indian—was important. She was, in a way, the guarantee, the bond that a man was obliged to furnish in order to merit the choicest privileges. For the Laws of the Indies were made with a view to maintaining the family unit secure, thus giving “the New World venture” a character of permanency. And so bachelors were enjoined to seek wives—with promises of privileges and grants, at first; with threats of loss of property, later.

The women, who, according to the passenger lists, most frequently bore the names of María, Catalina, Isabel, Juana, Ana, Inés, Francisca, Leonor, Beatriz, Elvira . . . came to the new lands in considerable numbers, mostly from the territory which was then known as Castile. They were of all social classes, and included ladies of the upper strata, who accompanied the wives of the viceroys and other dignitaries, those of the middle-classes whose husbands or other male relatives were tradesmen or merchants, and even some women of ill-repute—in spite of the strict laws which purposed to exclude them from the New World.

So keen, indeed, was the feminine response to the call of the Indies; so steady, afterwards, the rise of *criollas* and *mestizas*, that as early as 1565, Don Lope García de Castro, Governor of Peru, asked his Majesty to prohibit the entrance of so many women from Spain, “for those who are here are already in excess, and as the ones who come from there, ‘come in need’, many of them set a bad example to those now being reared here, who are not few.”<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand properly woman’s rôle in colonial times one

<sup>1</sup> “V. M. debe mandar que no pasen à esta tierra tantas mugeres, porque sobran las que acá hay, y como las que de allá bienen, bienen con necesidad, dan muchas dellas mal exemplo à las que aora de nuevo se crían acá, que no son pocas.” (Carta del Licenciado Castro a S. M., 23 sept. 1565. In Víctor M. Maurtua, *Juicio de límites entre el Perú y Bolivia*. Prueba peruana presentada al gobierno de la República Argentina. Barcelona, 1906, vol. I, p. 71.)



should not think merely of the women who came from Spain, but also of the Indians who so frequently became the legitimate—or illegitimate—wives of the Spaniards, and, above all, of the native-born daughters, white or of mixed lineage. Life in the colonies was definitely patterned after that of Spain. Socially, the conquistadores and the other Spanish settlers and their families constituted one class—regardless of what their social status had been in Spain or whether the wife was Spanish or Indian. The Indian wife and the mestizo children were an integral part of the Spanish family and had all the rights and privileges of the husband and father. The outstanding example of this *mestizaje*, undoubtedly, is Garcilaso de la Vega Inca, the son of one of the conquerors of Peru and an Inca princess. Born and educated in Peru, he was later able to go to Spain, bearing two surnames of the highest Spanish and Indian lineage, and became there one of the great writers of the Golden Age. In his *Royal Commentaries* one can see how he feels, equally, the proud heir and trustee of the ancestral traditions of his mother and of his father, who represented the two cultures which were fused in his being, as they are in all Spanish America. Spanish culture, as it merged with the indigenous ones, and was forced to live transplanted in new conditions, undoubtedly suffered profound modifications which very early lent originality to that of America. But the contributions of Spain—language, religion, institutions, customs—were incorporated in essence in the new American culture. The books, as well as the laws, came from the land of the conquerors. And the currents prevailing there soon found their way to the Indies, as had the New World treasures to Spain. The women, although so often of mixed lineage, retained, strangely enough, the basic Hispanic characteristics which make them, even today, more than four hundred years later, so like the women of Spain.

Colonial Spanish America passed through the same cultural phases as Spain from the 16th through the 19th century, and in each of these phases, as during the Conquest, we find women participating in social and public life according to the changing spirit and custom of the times.<sup>1</sup> The 17th century produced women outstanding in sanctity, like Santa Rosa of Lima (1586-1617);<sup>2</sup> in perversity, like Catalina de los Ríos Lisperguer,

<sup>1</sup> See Héctor Pedro Blomberg, *Mujeres de la historia americana*, Buenos Aires, 1933; Marta Elba Miranda, *Mujeres chilenas*, Santiago de Chile, 1940; Carlos Hernández, *Mujeres célebres de México*, San Antonio, Texas, 1918; Laureana Wright de Kleinhaus, *Mujeres notables mexicanas*, México, 1910; Elvira García y García, *La mujer peruana a través de los siglos*, Lima, 1924-25.

<sup>2</sup> See F. M. Capes, *The Flower of the New World. Being a short history of St. Rose of Lima*, London, 1899; J. A. Catá de Caella, *Vida de Santa Rosa de Lima, Patrona de América*, Buenos Aires, 1942; L. G. Alonso Getino, *Santa Rosa de Lima, Patrona de América. Su retrato corporal y su talla intelectual, según los nuevos documentos*, Madrid, 1943; M. Storm, *The Life of Saint Rose, first American saint and only American woman saint*, Santa Fe, N. M., 1937; L. Marechal, *Vida de Santa Rosa de Lima*, Buenos Aires, 1943; S. Maynard, *Rose of America*, New York, 1943.

"La Quintrala" (d. 1665);<sup>1</sup> in adventurous spirit, like Catalina de Eraúso, "La Monja Alférez" (1592-1636);<sup>2</sup> in literary and intellectual endeavor, like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695). The 18th century, with its gaiety, elegance and laxity, saw the rise—especially in the capitals of the viceroyalties: Lima and Mexico—of the witty, mundane, frivolous woman who ruled in the courts and salons by her grace and by her spirit, whom one can see personified in Micaela Villegas, "La Perricholi" (1739-1819).<sup>3</sup>

But these women, whose life was one of ease and luxury, gave all—wealth, spirit, even their lives—when the time came to fight for freedom. During the War of Independence<sup>4</sup> the women proved their mettle by their staunchness, bravery and abnegation. All helped at home. Some founded and animated the salons where the fight for independence was plotted and planned; some were the friends of the liberators; others fought at the side of the men on the battle-field; many suffered imprisonment—and even death. The names of Manuela Sáenz<sup>5</sup> of Ecuador, Policarpa Salavarrieta and Antonia Santos of Colombia, Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez and Leona Vicario de Quintana Roo<sup>6</sup> of Mexico, Javiera Carrera de Valdés<sup>7</sup> and Luisa Recabarren de Marín of Chile, Juana Azurduy de Padilla of Bolivia, Mariquita Sánchez de Thompson of Argentina, and so many others are, through one or another of the motives cited, linked to the heroic saga of the War of Independence in their respective countries.

It should not surprise us, therefore, that the Spanish American woman of the independent period, heir to this temper and tradition, should have had, according to her type of culture, an ever-increasing activity, both in the past century, and in the present, when world tendencies became more favorable to feminine participation in all fields. It is natural, too, that we should find in Spanish America—as in the rest of the world—great literary activity among women during the romantic period, and that today, in the 20th century, the work of the women poets there should have achieved an astonishing development that corresponds, with distinct originality, to parallel manifestations in other literatures.

<sup>1</sup> B. Vicuña Mackenna, *La Quintrala*, 5th ed., Santiago de Chile, 1943; Aurelio Díaz Meza, *La Quintrala y su época*, Santiago de Chile, n.d.; Magdalena Petit, *La Quintrala*, Santiago de Chile, 1932; English transl. by Lulú Vargas Vila, New York, Macmillan, 1942.

<sup>2</sup> *Historia de la monja alférez, Doña Catalina de Eraúso*, escrita por ella misma e ilustrada con notas y documentos por D. Joaquín María Ferrer, Paris, 1829; Nicolás León, *La Monja Alférez, Doña Catalina de Eraúso. ¿Cuál era su verdadero sexo?*, México, 1923.

<sup>3</sup> Luis Alberto Sánchez, *La Perricholi*, Santiago de Chile, 1936; Ventura García Calderón, *La Périchole*, Paris, 1939.

<sup>4</sup> See V. Grez, *Las mujeres de la Independencia*, Santiago de Chile, 1910; A. P. Carranza, *Patricias argentinas*, Buenos Aires, 1910; J. M. Urquidí, *Bolivianas ilustres*, La Paz, 1919; J. D. Monsalve, *Mujeres de la Independencia*, Bogotá, 1926; L. Rubio Siliceo, *Mujeres célebres en la independencia de México*, México, 1929; T. D. Bernard, *Mujeres de la epopeya sanmartiniana*, Buenos Aires, 1941.

<sup>5</sup> A. Miramón, *Los septembrinos*, Bogotá, 1939; A. Rumazo González, *Manuela Sáenz, la libertadora del Libertador*, Cali, Colombia, 1944.

<sup>6</sup> G. García, *Leona Vicario, heroína insurgente*, México, 1910.

<sup>7</sup> B. Vicuña Mackenna, *Doña Javiera de Carrera*, Santiago de Chile, 1904.



\*

If social conditions mold literature, then the woman of today must necessarily write in a way different from that of the past. Formerly only women of wealth and position—those who had the means, the culture and the necessary leisure to write, or those in the Church who were also of a privileged class culturally and socially, were able to represent their sex in writing. It was the same the world over. For it was not until the eighteenth century, when ideals of democracy quickened the pulse-beat of individuals and nations, that women of other classes began to write. Yet they did so meekly, and often surreptitiously. Jane Austen, it is said, used to hide her manuscripts whenever anyone entered the room. She did not want to be caught in the act of writing! For writing for the public, as some thought, disobeyed all precepts of maidenly modesty:

*Alas! a woman that attempts the pen,  
Such a presumptuous creature is esteemed,  
The fault can by no virtue be redeemed.*<sup>1</sup>

It was almost an infringement on their chastity. Many women feared the darts of incrimination, and guarded their identity under the sheltering garment of pseudonyms: "A Lady", "A Lady of Rank", "A Lady of Distinction", "A Lady of Hebrew Faith", "A Banished Lady"<sup>2</sup> . . . This genteel desire to preserve a discreet anonymity was later to be discarded by some for more virile *noms de plume*, such as George Eliot, George Sand, Fernán Caballero. It is known, of course, that animosity towards feminine literature was so strong that some, to be read, had to yield to this kind of literary subterfuge. A glance at any of the anthologies of feminine "gems" explains why some of those with a will to succeed had to appear in masculine guise.

There is a theory concerning what one might call the "periodicity" of women in literature. Some literary trends are conducive to feminine participation; others thwart all genuine expressions of femininity.<sup>3</sup> Romanticism, for example, with its divorce from rule and tradition, is a great period for feminine literary activity. Women writers at this time excel those of any former period. Their inspiration is fresh and genuine; their expression, spontaneous—unencumbered by set rules. Charles Maurras has written on the "femininity" of this literary movement. It cannot be studied in its true significance without examining the production of the great women writers born under its aegis, for the feminine qualities of

<sup>1</sup> Anne, Countess of Winchilsea, 1660-1720.

<sup>2</sup> See O. Hamst, *Aggravating ladies* . . ., London, 1880.

<sup>3</sup> "Certaines périodes sont plus favorables que d'autres à la littérature féminine. La vie de société permet les talents de Mme. de Sévigné, de Mme. de La Fayette et de Mme. du Deffand. Le romantisme libéra le cœur éperdu de George Sand et de Marceline Desbordes-Valmore. Mais le scientisme, qui régna entre 1860 et 1890, s'il fit la gloire de Taine et de Zola, fut nettement défavorable aux femmes . . . Avec ses exigences de rime, de rythme, d'assonances et d'allitérations, le Parnasse ne pouvait les séduire. Et de même le symbolisme, trop abstrait" . . . (J. Larnac, *Histoire de la littérature féminine en France*, 5ième ed., Paris, 1929, p. 224.)

high emotional and sensorial propensities lend themselves admirably to the sentimental and warm effusions of the Romanticists. "Au lieu de dire que le romantisme a fait dégénérer les âmes ou les esprits français, ne serait-il pas meilleur de se rendre compte qu'il les effémina?"—says Maurras.<sup>1</sup> For woman's domain lies in the realm of free expression. Emotion in her is stronger than reason. And that is why, also, woman is more successful in all forms of subjective literature. She excels in lyric poetry where every word is measured and doled out in terms of herself. She delights in the novel of the intimate type where each heroine, like those of George Sand and Colette, is but a facet of her most intriguing self. She is pastmaster at what Ortega y Gasset calls the "private forms" of literature, such as the letter, the memoir, the journal. Larnac attributes this to the fact that profound thought is not a necessary adjunct to the genre so popular in the days of Mme. de La Fayette and Mme. de Sévigné. ("Que faut-il, en effet, pour trousseur une jolie lettre? Intelligence vive, imagination spontanée, désir de plaire, besoin de se confier, qualités que possèdent les femmes au plus haut degré.")<sup>2</sup>

Most women have been satisfied to write as women. Therein lies their true worth, for it is then that they give us something different from what man may produce. As soon as they attempt to emulate men, trying to mold their personalities into patterns created by and for masculine minds, women are but secondary figures at best.

Yet the "intellectual woman", the one who feels that she is "as good as a man," existed long before the advent of the modern woman. During the Renaissance, women who applied themselves to the more serious spheres of thought were few and were held in great esteem. They proved as good "Latinists" as any man. They delved as deeply into the classics; their minds followed the same philosophic paths. Later, more women became obsessed with the desire to know. To some, with keen minds, it was a spiritual necessity; to others, perhaps, but another fashion to follow. The "femmes savantes" became legion. They were, in many cases, insufferable pedants. The men bitterly fought this attitude, which they found detestable in women. They abhorred the way in which some of them flaunted their knowledge. "Be ever cautious in displaying your good sense",—wisely counseled Dr. Gregory in *A Father's Legacy to his Daughter*—"if you happen to have any learning keep it a profound secret, especially from the men . . .". Molière had expressed the same wish:

*Et j'aime que souvent, aux questions qu'on fait,  
Elle sache ignorer les choses qu'elle sait;  
De son étude enfin je veux qu'elle se cache,  
Et qu'elle ait du savoir sans vouloir qu'on le sache . . .*

In Spain they had been voicing the same views. Lope de Vega had written:

<sup>1</sup> *Romantisme et révolution*, Paris, 1922, p. 189.

<sup>2</sup> J. Larnac, *op. cit.*, p. 103.



*¿Quién la mete a la mujer  
Con Petrarca y Garcilaso,  
Siendo su Virgilio y Tasso,  
Hilar, lavar y coser?*

And Quevedo had unleashed his scorn in his biting essay, "La culta latini-parla." An anthology inspired by the *bas-bleu* would fill many volumes. The theme is often drawn upon to elucidate some aspect of the "woman-question"—pro or contra.

The course of women in literature has followed almost identical patterns everywhere. Spanish literature—which in colonial times was the only model for Spanish American writers, and which has continued to exert an influence upon them after Independence—is rife with the names of women, some of whom, like Santa Teresa de Jesús, rank among the greatest women writers of universal literature.

In modern times, also, Spain saw the rise of a new feminine literary movement in the romantic period, and in the later tendencies of the 19th century. Some of these women were among the best writers of the times. Fernán Caballero (Cecilia Boehl de Faber) in her novels of Andalusian life, with their wealth of folklore, marks the beginning of the Spanish regional novel. For she was to bridge the gap that lay between the isolated sketches of life and manners popularized by the so-called "costumbrista" writers such as Larra, Mesonero Romanos, Estébanez Calderón, and the closely-knit novel of life in the various regions of Spain as cultivated by Pereda, Valera, Leopoldo Alas and others. The Countess of Pardo Bazán introduced Naturalism into Spain and attempted to implant the precepts of Zola by defending, and personally applying, the methods of the French writer in the novels that made her famous, notably *Los pazos de Ulloa* and its sequel *La madre naturaleza*. Concepción Arenal became one of the world's leading criminologists and sociologists. Her papers on prison reforms were read before outstanding authorities on the matter and praised by them. Her works on philanthropy and charity became "guides" in the treatment of the poor and destitute.

There were also great romantic poetesses such as Carolina Coronado, and Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, who belongs to Spain as much as to her native Cuba. Rosalía de Castro, "that wise and sad little Celtic woman," wrote poems in her native Galician—very much like the "lieder" of the folk so dear to her. Her later songs, in the more austere Castilian, are steeped in nostalgia—in that heart-rending *morriña* so characteristic of the expatriated Galician.

The 20th century, on the other hand, has seen a decline of feminine literature in Spain in comparison with the high point it has reached in Spanish America. The Modernista movement brought about an essential change in the literary relations between Spanish America and Spain, which consisted, mainly, in the fact that Spanish American letters then achieve

complete independence and for the first time influence the literature of the Mother Country. Post-modernist feminine poetry, therefore, is born independent of all Spanish influence, and it is it, rather, that has an influence on the weaker feminine poetry of Spain. The work of the modern women poets in Spanish America offers, in its collective development and in its daring and sincerity, new characteristics which have much in common with that of the women writers of other countries such as France, England and the United States.

Women today are writers by profession. Literature for them is no longer an "adornment" (for ladies of leisure), nor a poignant necessity to express a burning thought or emotion. They write with ease and assurance. They no longer fear to be identified with what Lanson called "cette insupportable lignée de femmes auteurs." No longer do critics have to speak of a book with undue severity and scorn, or with patronizing condescension, because a woman wrote it. Many women rank among the best authors of the day, and there is no distinction made, anywhere, as to whether the author of a book be man or woman. A far cry from the days when it was recommended that books by men and those by women be put on different shelves; or when the editor of a book by Katherine Phillips (Orinda) said in reference to her poems: "Some of them would be no disgrace to the name of any Man . . . and there are none that may not pass with favour, when it is remembered that they fell hastily from the pen but of a woman".<sup>1</sup> And because they no longer have to proclaim their femininity or assert their equality with men, women today are more serene in their literary efforts. Formerly, says Virginia Woolf, a woman writer was "meeting criticism; she was saying this by way of aggression, or that by way of conciliation. She was admitting that she was 'only a woman', or protesting that she was 'as good as a man'".<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary Spanish American feminine poetry is a product of the same universal ideas and principles which have inspired women throughout the entire modern world. But these ideas and principles, operating in a medium as rich in character and tradition as Spanish America, have achieved singularly distinctive results which we shall attempt to analyze and evaluate.

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<sup>1</sup> J. C. Squire, *A Book of Women's Verse*, Oxford, 1921, preface, p. xv.

<sup>2</sup> *A Room of One's Own*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., [1929], p. 129.





WOMEN POETS BEFORE DELMIRA AGUSTINI





# I

## BEFORE MODERNISM

From the enigmatic "AMARILIS"<sup>1</sup> (who in the early part of the seventeenth century wrote, in Peru, the celebrated amatory "epístola" in verse to "the Monster of Nature," Lope de Vega) to the tragic Delmira Agustini, there are many women, of more or less merit, whose names figure in the annals of Spanish American literature.

Who is this "Amarilis Indiana"? has been the question raised ever since the famous *silvas* appeared, together with his reply, in Lope's *La Filomena* (1621).<sup>2</sup> Countless scholars have attempted to elucidate this literary enigma, especially since it involves one of the greatest writers of Spain. They have attributed the poem to various ladies of colonial times—giving plausible reasons for their conjectures. Some have suggested that the elusive "Amarilis" was not a woman, really, but a man; while others have even considered it a ruse of the great dramatist himself. And so, although one cannot say, with certainty, whether it was Doña María de Alvarado, Doña María Tello de Lara y de Arévalo y Espinosa, Doña Isabel de Figueroa, or Doña Ana de Morillo, the fact remains that "Amarilis" is the true precursor of all the Spanish American "muses."

Lope's heart—so susceptible to feminine allure—must have been touched by her warm praise and regard:

*Al fin en éste, donde el Sur me esconde,  
Oí, Belardo, tus conceptos bellos,  
Tu dulzura y estilo milagroso:  
Ví con quanto favor te corresponde  
El que vió de su Daphne los cabellos  
Trocados en su daño en lauro umbroso,  
Y admirando tu ingenio portentoso,  
No pude reportarme  
De descubrirme a ti, y a mí dañarme.*  
.....

*Oí tu voz, Belardo: mas ¿qué digo?*

<sup>1</sup> See M. Adán, "Amarilis", in *Mercurio Peruano*, Lima, 1939, XXI, 185-193; I. A. Leonard, "More conjectures regarding the identity of Lope de Vega's 'Amarilis Indiana'", in *Hispania*, Stanford, Cal., 1937, XX, 113-120; M. Menéndez y Pelayo, *Historia de la poesía hispano-americana*. Tomo II, Madrid, 1913, pp. 153-163; J. Millé y Giménez, "Lope de Vega y la supuesta Amarilis", in *Revista de la Biblioteca Archivo y Museo*, Madrid, 1930, VII, no. 25, pp. 1-11; L. A. Sánchez, *Historia de la literatura peruana*. I. *Los poetas de la Colonia*, Lima, 1921, pp. 136-145; idem., *La literatura peruana*. Tomo II, Lima, 1929, pp. 132-136; J. M. Souvirón, *Amarilis (Un amor de Lope de Vega)*, Santiago de Chile, 1935.

<sup>2</sup> Both "epístolas" appear in Vol. I (pp. 457-476) of the *Obras sueltas* of Lope de Vega, published by Sancha in Madrid, 1776.



*No Belardo, milagro han de llamarte . . .*  
 . . . . .  
*¡O quanto acertarás, si imaginares,*  
*Que es patria tuya el cielo,*  
*Y que eres peregrino acá en el suelo!*  
*Porque no hallo en él quien igualarte*  
*Pueda, no sólo en todo, mas ni en parte,*  
*Que eres único y solo*  
*En quanto miran uno y otro polo . . .*

especially since, although with becoming modesty, she confessed that Beauty had not passed her by:

*De la beldad, que el cielo acá reparte,*  
*Nos cupo, según dicen, mucha parte . . .*

And although a sea lay between them, and the love she professed was purely Platonic, for she lived "content in clean celibacy":

*Contenta vivo en limpio celibato,*  
*Con virginal estado,*  
*A Dios con gran afecto consagrado,*  
*Y espero en su bondad y su grandeza,*  
*Me tendrá de su mano,*  
*Guardando inmaculada mi pureza . . .*  
 . . . . .  
*Finalmente, Belardo yo te ofrezco*  
*Un alma pura a tu valor rendida . . .*

his gallantry could not fail to answer—in a similar epistle: "Belardo a Amarilis"—the love-call of that "Amarilis Indiana," even though it came, as he wittily put it, "from the other world":

*Yo os amo justamente, y tanto crece*  
*Mi amor, quanto en mi idea os imagino*  
*Con el valor, que vuestro honor merece.*  
*A vuestra luz mi pensamiento inclino,*  
*De cuyo sol antípoda me veo,*  
*Qual suele lo mortal a lo divino.*  
 . . . . .  
*Para quereros yo, licencia os pido,*  
*Que dejaros de amar injuria fuera,*  
*Por esso mismo que de vos lo he sido.*

Amarilis' poem is a good example of Platonism, and, as it has already been pointed out, superior to Lope's reply. The still-unknown poetess was, for the most part, simple, clear and unaffected in expression, although, at times, she, too, succumbed to the impact of the powerful wave of Petrarchism.

Menéndez y Pelayo in his *Historia de la poesía hispano-americana* mentions, besides Amarilis, a certain Doña Gerónima de Velasco of Quito, whose praises Lope de Vega sings in his *Laurel de Apolo* (1630), and

another anonymous Peruvian poetess of the same century whose "Discurso en honor de la poesía" was included in the *Parnaso Antártico* of Pedro Mexía. All the literary histories of the various Spanish American countries give the names of their women writers; but in the light of unbiased appraisal only a few are outstanding, or even worthy of mention. In colonial times most of the women who wrote merely sounded the familiar Peninsular echoes. But there was one who rose to heights unsurpassed by any other poet of her day: the Mexican, Juana de Asbaje Ramírez de Cantillana, better known as the nun SOR JUANA INES DE LA CRUZ (1651-1695).<sup>1</sup>

She was, in her day, the only American feminine example of encyclopedic learning<sup>2</sup>—not unknown in the Europe of the Renaissance. At a time when most women in the Colonies were satisfied with the meager gleanings of a rudimentary education, she, in her insatiable thirst for knowledge, avidly sought to imbibe from every available fount: literary, artistic, scientific, philosophical, theological . . . "Mathematics were familiar to her,"—says Amado Nervo—"physiology for her had no secrets; physics was in the catalogue of her favorite 'accomplishments'; she knew grammar as well as the best of them . . .; she versified in Latin and even in Aztec; she understood medicine well; scholastic philosophy, moral and dogmatic theology, canon law . . . and, above all, the fine arts. She had a thorough knowledge of all sciences . . . especially the astronomic." She was also known for her singular aptitude for music,<sup>3</sup> as well as for her creditable talent for painting. For "she was everything she wished to be."

She had been known as a prodigy of phenomenal proportions who, by

<sup>1</sup> See P. Henríquez Ureña, "Bibliografía de Sor J. I. de la C.", in *Revue Hispanique*, New York, 1917, XL, 161-214; repr. in *El Libro y el Pueblo*, México, 1934, Vol. XII. D. Schons, *Bibliografía de Sor J. I. de la C.*, México, 1927. For modern interpretations of Sor Juana see: E. Abreu Gómez, *Semblanza de Sor Juana*, México, 1938; idem, *Sor J. I. de la C.: Bibliografía y biblioteca*, Mexico, 1934; Clara Campoamor, *Sor J. I. de la C.*, Buenos Aires, 1944; E. A. Chávez, *Ensayo de psicología de Sor J. I. de la C.*, Barcelona, 1931; idem, *Sor J. I. de la C.: Su vida y obra*, Barcelona, 1931; G. Fernández McGregor, *La santificación de Sor J. I. de la C.*, México, 1932; M. Menéndez y Pelayo, *Historia de la poesía hispano-americana*, Tomo I, Madrid, 1911, pp. 73-82; Amado Nervo, *Juana de Asbaje*, México, 1910; D. Schons, "Some obscure points in the life of Sor J. I. de la C.", in *Modern Philology*, Chicago, 1926, XXIV, 141-162; K. Vossler, *Die "zehnte Muse von Mexico"*, Sor J. I. de la C., München, 1934; and Elizabeth Wallace, *Sor J. I. de la C., poetisa de corte y convento*, México, 1944.

<sup>2</sup> Menéndez y Pelayo said of her "case": ". . . es algo tan nuevo, tan anormal y peregrino, que a no tener sus propias confesiones escritas con tal candor y sencillez, parecería hipérbole desmedida de sus panegiristas." (*Historia de la poesía hispano-americana*, Madrid, 1911, vol. I, p. 77).

<sup>3</sup> She is said to have written a book on methods, finding the old ones "narrow and primitive," and to have composed many a melody for the "villancicos" that were sung at church functions. An anonymous admirer (quoted by Menéndez y Pelayo, *op. cit.*, p. 76) said in her praise:

Nuevos metros balló, nuevos asuntos,  
Nueva resolución a los problemas,  
Y a la música nuevos contrapuntos.



a precocious ruse,<sup>1</sup> learned to read at the age of three, wrote a worthy "loa" for the feast of the Sacred Sacrament when she was eight, and mastered Latin in twenty lessons! And she was only seventeen when, to sound the full extent of her learning, it was proposed by her friend and intellectual admirer, the viceroy (the Marquis of Mancera), that she take a public examination before prominent members of the court. Forty learned men, of all the faculties, were her examiners, and she astounded them all by the breadth and depth of her heterogeneous and profound knowledge.

At court, as a favored lady-in-waiting to the viceroy's wife, she came in contact with the best society of the time, and formed part of that mundane, festive, lavish and licentious life that characterized the reign of Philip IV in Spain and in the Colonies. She undoubtedly enjoyed these social and intellectual contacts, and, perhaps, the gallantry of some courtly admirer. But, resplendent with beauty, intelligence, wit, charm and youth, in the seventeenth year of her life she was to cast aside "the vanities of life" and enter the secluded and meditative walls of a convent.

It has been suggested that it was probably a disappointing or frustrated love-affair that drove her to seek the calm and composure of a conventual life. But in her famous *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, although she confesses that it was not "vocation" that prompted her to become a nun, she states clearly that, as she was averse to matrimony, it was the only way she could find to pursue freely and uninterruptedly those intellectual pursuits which her avid spirit craved. (Whether this was the actual—or the rationalized—truth, one can never know).

The cloistered life at that time, however, was by no means what we term "monachal." That is, the asceticism, rigor and austerity that are generally associated with monastic life were not yet a prevailing feature of the times, as they were not in Spain. Nuns at the time of Sor Juana were allowed the service of maids, free use of their money, and other mundane privileges. The convents were often social centers where people of eminence would gather. Their feasts, and even dances, were famed for their lavishness and exquisite food. (For virtue, then, "had a happy countenance"—says Amado Nervo). And Sor Juana, whom Benjamín Jarnés aptly calls the "Virreina fugitiva"—a fugitive from life, from love—did, indeed, hold court for the many who took delight in her genial, charming and learned company.

During most of the twenty-seven years that she spent in the convent

<sup>1</sup> "No había cumplido los tres años de mi edad, cuando enviando mi madre a una hermana mía, mayor que yo, a que enseñase a leer en una de las que llaman *Amigas*, me llevó a mí tras ella el cariño y la travesura, y viendo que le daban lección, me encendí yo de manera en el deseo de saber leer, que engañando, a mi parecer, a la maestra, le dije *que mi madre ordenaba que me diese lección*. Ella no lo creyó, porque no era creíble, pero por complacer al donaire, me la dió." (Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*. Ed. Abreu Gómez, México, 1929, p. 12).

Sor Juana kept in close touch with the outside world through her social and intellectual friendships. And the change from the secular to the religious life did not prevent her from addressing gallant verses, of the courtly type, to her friends—especially to the two *virreinas*: the Marchioness of Mancera and the Countess of Paredes, the “Laura” and “Lysi” of her poems. She was greatly loved and admired by all who knew her not only because of her talents, but for her sweetness and nobility of spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Her books were her constant delight, but she could feed her intellectual hunger without them—as she explains—for she studied “in all things that God created,” and she read truths in the “universal machine” when books were denied her. Upon one occasion an abbess—“a very saintly and very candid person”—who believed study to be a matter for the Inquisition, enjoined her not to pursue it further. She complied by laying her books aside for three months. But she could not refrain from “studying”—even against her will—for the most casual and homely observations: the converging lines of her bedroom,<sup>2</sup> some children spinning a top,<sup>3</sup> the frying of an egg,<sup>4</sup> suggested fascinating problems and resulted in the deduction of important scientific truths.

But finally the opposition became stronger than she could bear. (It has been intimated that she was even threatened by the Inquisition). And so, two years before her death, she disposed of all her treasures—her books, which numbered about 4000 volumes, her scientific apparatus, her musical instruments—and gave herself fully to a life ascetic to the extreme, torturing her body with rigor. Her chastized life finally came to an end in 1695 when, during an epidemic which swept the city of Mexico, she contracted the deadly disease by piously tending to the stricken nuns of her convent.

1 “... como, entre otros beneficios, debo a Dios un natural tan blando y tan afable y las religiosas me aman mucho por él (sin reparar, como buenas, en mis faltas)”. (*Respuesta*, p. 19).

2 “Paseábame algunas veces en el testero de un dormitorio nuestro (que es una pieza muy capaz) y estaba observando que siendo las líneas de sus dos lados paralelas y su techo a nivel, la vista fingía que sus líneas se inclinaban una a otra y que su techo estaba más bajo en lo distante que en lo próximo: de donde infería que las líneas visuales corren rectas, pero no paralelas, sino que van a formar una figura piramidal y discurría si sería esta la razón que obligó a los antiguos a dudar si el mundo era esférico o no.” (*Respuesta*, p. 26).

3 “Estaban en mi presencia dos niñas jugando con un trompo y apenas yo vi el movimiento y la figura, cuando empecé, con esta mi locura, a considerar el fácil *motu* de la forma esférica; y cómo duraba el impulso ya impreso e independiente de su causa, pues distante la mano de la niña, que era la causa motiva, bailaba el trompillo: y no contenta con esto, hice traer harina y cernerla para que, en bailando el trompo, encima, se conociese si eran círculos perfectos o no los que describía con su movimiento y hallé que no eran sino unas líneas espirales que iban perdiendo lo circular cuando se iba remitiendo el impulso.” (*Respuesta*, p. 27).

4 “Pues, ¿qué os pudiera contar, señora, de los secretos naturales que he descubierto estando guisando? Veo que un huevo se une y fríe en la manteca o aceite, y, por contrario, se despedaza en el almíbar; ver que para que el azúcar se conserve fluida basta echarle una muy mínima parte de agua en que haya estado membrillo u otra fruta agria; ver que la yema y clara de un mismo huevo son tan contrarias, que en los unos, que sirven para el azúcar, sirve cada una de por sí y juntos no.” (*Respuesta*, p. 27).



Her complete works fill three volumes and include countless poems—many of them the facile ones of circumstance—in an infinite variety of verse structure and form: *coplas*, *decasílabos*, *décimas*, *endecasílabos*, *endechas*, *glosas*, *letras*, *liras*, *octavas*, *ovillejos*, *quintillas*, *redondillas*, *romances*, *silvas*, *sonetos*, *villancicos* . . .; two plays: *Amor es más laberinto* and *Los empeños de una casa*; three *autos sacramentales*: *El cetro de José*, *El mártir del Sacramento San Hermenegildo* and *El divino Narciso*; the *Sueños* (written in imitation of Góngora's *Soledades*) and the famous *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* which is both an apologia for her much-censured intellectual thirst and a model autobiography and self-exegesis.

Her work often reveals unavoidable traces of the prevailing currents of the times—that baroque, affected quality that characterized the writings of some of the great Spanish writers of the latter part of the Golden Age: Góngora, Quevedo, Calderón. But if some censure (too severely, perhaps) her "Gongorism", one may justify it by seeing in it not merely a slavish bowing to a single, direct influence, but the following of a trend that was the common heritage of her day.

She was always referred to by her contemporaries as "the Tenth Muse" or the "Phoenix of Mexico"; and when the first volume of her works was published in Madrid in 1689 it bore the following title, worthy of the affected tenor of the times: *Inundacion Castalida de la unica poetisa, musa dezima, soror Juana Ines de la Cruz, religiosa professa en el Monasterio de San Geronimo de la imperial ciudad de Mexico. Que en varios metros, idiomas y estilos, fertiliza varios assumptos, con elegantes, sutiles, claros, ingeniosos, utiles versos, para enseñanza, recreo y admiracion* . . . (The title of *Castalian flood*—or deluge—was soberly changed to *Poemas* in the second edition published the following year).

The subject of Sor Juana's "love" has been a debatable point since her time. There has never been any factual basis or proof of it, although some poems express the fire and pain of that "amoroso tormento" so genuinely and poignantly that there can hardly be any doubt as to its authenticity. Chávez,<sup>1</sup> in his attempt to reconstruct this vital aspect of her life—which he considers a paramount factor in her decision to enter the convent—traces it, in her verses, from its festive, faltering beginnings to the reality of its tragic, bitter end. For she, who in a well-known sonnet<sup>2</sup> so lightly flaunts her feminine contrariness in the game of love—in what might be termed her pre-amorous period—was later to know

<sup>1</sup> Ezequiel A. Chávez, *Ensayo de psicología de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, Barcelona, 1931.

<sup>2</sup> *Al que ingrato me deja, busco amante;  
Al que amante me sigue, dejo ingrata;  
Constante adoro a quien mi amor maltrata;  
Maltrato a quien mi amor busca constante* . . .

the torments,<sup>1</sup> the disillusionment,<sup>2</sup> even the hate,<sup>3</sup> inspired by that Tyrant that makes of life "a wretched servitude", and which she so knowingly and succinctly defines:

*Amor empieza por desasosiego,  
Solicitud, ardores y desvelos;  
Crece con riesgos, lances y recelos;  
Susténtase de llantos y de ruego;  
Doctrinanle tibiezas y despego;  
Conserva el ser, entre engañosos velos,  
Hasta que con agravios o con celos,  
Apaga con sus lágrimas su fuego.*

The poems in which she attempts to dispel unfounded jealousy on the part of the lover, such as:

*Si otros ojos he visto,  
Mátenme, Fabio, tus airados ojos;  
Si a otro cariño asisto,  
Asistanme implacables, tus enojos;  
Y si otro amor del tuyo me divierte,  
Tú, que has sido mi vida, me dés muerte.*

and the magnificent sonnet:

*Esta tarde, mi bien, cuando te hablaba,  
Como en tu rostro y tus acciones vía  
Que con palabras no te persuadía,  
Que el corazón me vieses, deseaba;  
Y Amor, que mis intentos ayudaba  
Venció lo que imposible parecía,  
Pues entre el llanto que el dolor vertía,  
El corazón, deshecho, destilaba . . .  
¡Baste ya de rigores, mi bien, baste;  
No te atormenten más celos tiranos,  
Ni el vil recelo tu quietud contraste*

---

<sup>1</sup> ¿Vesme, Alcino, que atada a la cadena  
De amor, paso, en sus hierros aberrojada  
Miseria esclavitud, desesperada,  
De libertad y de consuelo ajena?  
¿Ves de dolor y angustia el alma llena,  
De tan fieros tormentos lastimada  
Y entre las vivas llamas abrasada,  
Juzgarse por indigna de su pena?

<sup>2</sup> Cuando mi error, y tu vileza veo  
Contemplo, Sylvio, de mi amor errado,  
Cuán grave es la malicia del pecado,  
Cuán violenta la fuerza de un deseo.  
. . . Yo bien quisiera cuando llego a verte,  
Viendo mi infame amor poder negarlo;  
Mas luego la razón justa me advierte  
Que sólo se remedía en publicarlo;  
Porque del gran delito de quererte,  
Sólo es bastante pena confesarlo.

<sup>3</sup> Sylvio, yo te aborrezco, y aun condeno  
El que estés de esta suerte en mi sentido;



*Con sombras necias, con indicios vanos,  
Pues ya en líquido humor viste y tocaste  
Mi corazón, deshecho entre tus manos! . . .*

are poignantly tender and sincere, as are those in which she grieves for his absence, when her eyes are veiled with weeping because they are bereft of the joy of his image. Few words can surpass the feeling and lyric depth of:

*Mas, ¿Cuándo, ¡ay! gloria mía!  
Mereceré gozar tu luz serena?  
¿Cuándo llegará el día  
Que pongas dulce fin a tanta pena?  
¿Cuándo veré tus ojos, dulce encanto,  
Y de los míos secarás el llanto?*

*¿Cuándo tu voz sonora  
Herirá mis oídos delicada,  
Y el alma que te adora,  
De inundación de gozos anegada,  
A recibirte con amante prisa  
Saldrá a los ojos desatada en risa?*

*.....  
Ven, pues, mi prenda amada  
Que ya fallece mi cansada vida  
De esta ausencia pesada;  
Ven, pues, que mientras tarde tu venida,  
Aunque me cueste su verdor enojos  
Regaré mi esperanza con mis ojos.*

These verses, where genuine emotion rules, and others of more spiritual inspiration, are, as Menéndez y Pelayo says,<sup>1</sup> "clean . . . of affectation and Gongorism" and "seem much more to be of the 16th century than of the 17th, and more those of a disciple of San Juan de la Cruz and of Fray Luis de León than of an ultramarine nun whose verses were printed with the title of *Inundación Castálida*" . . . Compare the limpid lyricism of

*Si al arroyo parlero  
Ves galán de las flores en el prado  
Que amante y lisonjero*

---

*Que infama al hierro el escorpión herido,  
Y a quien lo buella mancha inundo, el cieno.  
Eres como el mortífero veneno  
Que daña a quien lo vierte, inadvertido;  
Y en fin, eres tan malo y fermentido,  
Que aun para aborrecido, no eres bueno,  
Tu aspecto vil a mi memoria ofrezco,  
Aunque mi susto me lo contradice,  
Por darme yo la pena que merezco;  
Pues cuando considero lo que hice,  
No sólo a ti, corrida, te aborrezco,  
Pero a mí, por el tiempo que te quise.*

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 81.

*A cuantas mira intima su cuidado,  
En su corriente mi dolor te avisa  
Que a costa de mi llanto tienes risa.*

*Si ves que triste llora  
Su esperanza marchita en ramo verde  
Tórtola gemidora,  
En él y en ella mi dolor te acuerde,  
Que imitan con verdor, y con lamento,  
El mi esperanza, y ella mi tormento.*

*Si la flor delicada,  
Si la peña, que altiva no consiente  
Del tiempo ser ballada,  
Ambas me imitan, aunque variamente,  
Ya con fragilidad, ya con dureza,  
Mi dicha aquélla, y ésta mi firmeza.*

*Si ves el ciervo herido  
Que baja por el monte acelerado,  
Buscando, dolorido,  
Alivio al mal en un arroyo helado,  
Y sediento, al cristal se precipita,  
No en el alivio, en el dolor me imita.*

with the Gongoric style of the *Primero sueño* which begins:<sup>1</sup>

*Piramidal funesta de la tierra  
Nacida sombra al Cielo encaminaba  
De vanos obeliscos punta altiva,  
Escalar pretendiendo las Estrellas,  
Si bien sus luces bellas  
Exentas siempre, siempre rutilantes,  
La tenebrosa guerra,  
Que con negros vapores le intimaba  
La pavorosa sombra fugitiva,  
Burlaban tan distantes,  
Que su atezado ceño  
Al superior convexo aun no llegaba  
Del orbe de la Diosa,  
Que tres veces hermosa  
Con tres hermosos rostros ser ostenta,  
Quedando sólo dueño  
Del aire que empañaba  
Con el aliento denso que exhalaba:  
Y en la quietud contenta  
De imperio silencioso  
Sumisas sólo voces consentía  
De las nocturnas aves,  
Tan oscuras, tan graves,  
Que aun el silencio no se interrumpía.*

<sup>1</sup> *Die Welt im Traum*. Eine Dichtung der "Zehnten Muse von Mexico", Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Spanisch und Deutsch. Herausgegeben von Karl Vossler. Berlin, 1941.

She herself, like Lope de Vega and others, ridicules her own *culteranismo*:

Señor, ya el reloj del cielo  
 . . . Desde que nacisteis vos  
 Dos círculos ha cumplido;  
 Ya los ardientes caballos,  
 Por el estrellado circo  
 Han con el fogoso carro  
 Dado dos lucientes giros.  
 Ya la primavera hermosa  
 En sus árboles ha visto  
 Dos veces las tiernas flores  
 Y dos, los frutos opimos.  
 Ya los campos y los montes  
 Han, del tiempo, resistido  
 Dos veces el yerto invierno;  
 Y dos, el calor estivo;  
 Ya los risueños arroyos,  
 En los escarchados ríos  
 Dos veces se han visto presos,  
 Y dos, libres han salido.  
 Todo lo cual, gran señor,  
 Hablando en más llano estilo,  
 Quiere decir que ya vos  
 Dos años habéis cumplido;  
 Que saldréis de las mantillas;  
 Y, a la española, vestido,  
 Dareis muestras de muy hombre  
 En las señales de niño.

The popular—or folkloric—vein so characteristic of many of the great Hispanic writers, classic and modern, was not lacking in Sor Juana. Proof of this are the many poems that she wrote in which she imitates the speech and mode of expression of the Negroes<sup>2</sup> and Indians,<sup>3</sup> and especially her charming *villancicos*, of the most popular and even *criollo* flavor:

¡Barquero, barquero  
 Que te llevan las aguas los remos . . . !

\*

Al niño divino  
 Que llora en Belén,

<sup>1</sup> Chávez, *Op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> ¡Cantemo, Pilico,  
 que se va las Reina!  
 y dalemu turo  
 una Noche Buena!

Si la Cielo va  
 y Dioso la lleva,  
 ¿pala qué yolaá . . .  
 si eya sa contenta?

<sup>3</sup> Yo también, quimatí Dios,  
 mo adivinanza pondrá;  
 que no sólo los doctores  
 habla la Unversidá.

Espera osté, so doctor:  
 ¿No ha visto en la iglesia, osté  
 junto, mucho san José?  
 ¿Y entre todos, la labor  
 de Xochimilco, mejor?



*¡Déjenle . . . déjenle!*  
*¡Déjenle! que, a lo criollito, yo le cantaré.*

\*

*Niña que aun apenas*  
*Has sabido andar,*  
*Y ya en tus alientos*  
*Intentas volar.*  
*¡Ay, ay, ay! Y qué lindos*  
*Pasos das!*  
*Por las altas gradas*  
*Subes, sin parar;*  
*Y es que en ti el subir*  
*Es muy natural*  
*¡Ay, ay, ay, y qué lindos*  
*Pasos das!*

\*

*Con los pies sube al templo*  
*La niña bella;*  
*Con los pies anda*  
*Y con el alma, vuela!*

Nor was Sor Juana lacking in humor, wit or satire, qualities apparent throughout her work. At times her humor is merely festive; at others, she strikes a satiric note of profound and modern significance, as in the most quoted of her poems, the famous "Redondillas:"

*Hombres necios, que acusáis*  
*A la mujer sin razón*  
*Sin ver que sois la ocasión*  
*De lo mismo que culpáis . . .*

Other prominent women were to follow but none surpass Juana de Asbaje, that "Muger admirable por las Ciencias, Facultades y Artes, y varios Idiomas que poseyó perfectamente: Célebre y famosa en el Coro de los mayores y excelentes Poetas Latinos y Castellanos de el Orbe, a quien, con razón, se da el epitheto de MUSA DECIMA por su singular y egregio Numen: Fénix de la América: glorioso desempeño de su Sexo: honra de la Nación de este Nuevo Mundo: y Argumento de las admiraciones y Elogios del Antiguo" . . . as reads the inscription of her portrait in the Museum of the City of Toledo in Spain.

It is needless, for our purpose, to give the names of the many women who wrote poetry in colonial times. Perhaps the only other name before the 19th century worthy of mention is that of SOR FRANCISCA DEL CASTILLO

Y GUEVARA (1671-1742)<sup>1</sup>—"la Madre Castillo"—the Abbess of Tunja (Colombia) who, by mandate of her confessors, wrote her *Vida* and a book of *Sentimientos espirituales*. Both of these have been repeatedly, and favorably, compared with the writings of the greatest woman mystic: Santa Teresa, whom Sor Francisca zealously read and admired. The Colombian nun and Sor Juana<sup>2</sup> are the American counterparts of that mysticism which flourished in such profusion and excellence in 16th and 17th century Spain. Sor Josefa's natural and unaffected style prompted Menéndez y Pelayo to qualify her prose as "digna del siglo XVI" in spite of the fact that, as Carrasquilla says: "... a fines del siglo XVII y comienzos del XVIII . . . todos los que en Nueva Granada hablaban o escribían estaban dominados del más desafortado gongorismo." And the Colombian critic adds: "Siempre es castiza, pura, elegantísima en escribir, rica en voces y giros, donairoso en las construcciones, exacta en los símiles, intachable en la doctrina, profunda en exponerla y, sobre todo, sin rival en la ternura, sencillez y transparencia del estilo." Vergara y Vergara does not hesitate to call her, in 1867, "el escritor más notable que poseemos." She was a better prose writer than versifier. Among her few poems none has been more highly praised, or more often quoted, than that delicate "romancillo" which begins:

*El habla delicada  
Del Amante que estimo,  
Miel y leche destila  
Entre rosas y lirios.*

*Su meliflua palabra  
Corta como rocío,  
Y con ella florece  
El corazón marchito . . .*

The Independence and the new tendencies of the 19th century favored a greater development and variety in the literary activities of women. Thus, we find many who wrote in fields other than pure or creative literature, mainly education, producing works—original, or in translation—for schools, or for their feminine readers. Others took

<sup>1</sup> See R. M. Carrasquilla, "Discurso al recibirse como miembro de número de la Academia, el 6 de agosto de 1890," in *Anuario de la Academia Colombiana de la Lengua*, Bogotá, 1939, VI, 15-33 ["Respuesta" by J. M. Marroquín, *ibid.*, pp. 34-44]; A. Gómez Restrepo, *Historia de la literatura colombiana*, vol. II, Bogotá, 1940; pages dealing with La Madre Castillo reprinted in *Anuario de la Academia Colombiana de la Lengua*, Bogotá, 1942, VIII, 21-66; J. J. Ortega T., *Historia de la literatura colombiana*, Bogotá, 1934, pp. 40-43; P. P. Restrepo Olano, "Un viaje a Tunja: La Madre Castillo," in *Universidad de Antioquia*, Medellín, Colombia, 1942, XIII, 169-177; D. Samper Ortega, "La Madre Castillo," in *Anuario de la Academia Colombiana de la Lengua*, 1942-43, X, 330-350; J. M. Vergara y Vergara, *Historia de la literatura en Nueva Granada*, Parte 1a, Bogotá, 1867, pp. 196-206; 2nd ed., Bogotá, 1905, pp. 191-202.

<sup>2</sup> La Madre Castillo was familiar with Sor Juana's works, and her admiration of the Mexican nun's poems prompted her to copy some of them in her note-book. This later led to the erroneous attribution to the Colombian mystic of some poems which were rightfully Sor Juana's. Antonio Gómez Restrepo, considering them as the work of la Madre Castillo, quotes from them in his *Historia de la literatura colombiana*. The poems were summarily "restituted" to Sor Juana after the error became known, thanks to an article by the Mexican critic Alfonso Méndez Plancarte: "Un libro de Gómez Restrepo y una triple restitución a Sor Juana," in *Abside*, Mexico, 1941, V, núm. 7, pp. 451-463.

an active part in journalism. And although many in their columns merely catered to feminine interests—writing on embroidery, sewing, domestic science, etc.—there were some who wrote in a more general and virile vein. Notable among these was Leona Vicario, the precursor of the many Mexican women who afterwards engaged in this field.<sup>1</sup> Others, somewhat interested in politics, but mainly in literature, became the animators of social centers and salons where the literature of the time found the necessary inspiration and contacts for its development. Such a one was Mariquita Sánchez of Argentina who counted among her friends the greatest men of politics and letters of the day. Outstanding poets wrote their newest compositions in her album, and it was in her house that the music of the Argentine national anthem was composed by Blas Perera. She herself wrote comparatively little: a few poems, more letters and some memoirs which were never published. But her true contributions were her vitality and social genius.

More important to literature were the women who, for the first time in Spanish America, began to cultivate the novel, like the Argentinians<sup>2</sup> Eduarda Mansilla, Josefina Pelliza, Rosa Guerra, Juana Manso de Noronha, and Juana Manuela Gorriti. In Peru<sup>3</sup> one cannot study the genesis of the novel—especially that of the social and “realistic” type—without mentioning the names of two great women writers whose works did so much to form and enrich it: Clorinda Matto de Turner and Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera.

The women poets, everywhere, were numerous—and active. Typical of the tone and calibre of their work are the compositions included in the anthology which José Domingo Cortés compiled in 1875.<sup>4</sup> Of the fifty poetesses included only a few are worthy of the name. The themes are the conventional ones: religion (“La cruz”, “¡Dios!”, “Plegaria”), nature (“La caída de las hojas”, “A un caracol vacío”, “A una flor”, “A un pajarillo”, “A una rosa marchita”, “A una estrella”, “A la luna”), the home (“A la casa paterna”, “El hogar paterno”), parents (“A mi madre”, “A mi padre”), children (“A mis hijos”). There are several dedicated to Hope, Genius, Friendship; many written to friends (for albums); several that describe places of local interest, and three patriotic poems (one being the celebrated “Canto fúnebre a la muerte de Don Diego Portales” of Mercedes Marín del Solar—the first Chilean poetess). It is worth noting that the erotic verse—so prevalent in present-day feminine poetry in Spanish America—is hardly present here. And the few love poems included are wholly lacking in that wild eroticism so patent in

<sup>1</sup> See F. Ibarra de Anda, *Las mexicanas en el periodismo*, México, 1935.

<sup>2</sup> See R. Rojas, “Las mujeres escritoras,” in *La literatura argentina: Los modernos*, vol. II, Buenos Aires, 1925.

<sup>3</sup> See L. A. Sánchez, *La literatura peruana*, vol. II, Lima, 1929.

<sup>4</sup> *Poetisas americanas. Ramillete poético del bello sexo hispano-americano*, Paris, Bouret, 1875.



modern anthologies.<sup>1</sup> For the amorous plaints of these poetesses—like those of Edda, for instance—are in comparison with present-day verse, “submissive” and “dove-like.”

The Antilles did produce some poetesses of note, such as Salomé Ureña de Henríquez, of Santo Domingo (mother of the well-known Dominican writers: Pedro, Max and Camila Henríquez Ureña); Alejandrina Benítez, of Puerto Rico, whose son José Gautier Benítez is one of the glories of his island's Parnasse, and the prolific group of Cuban women poets: Luisa Pérez de Zambrana, Aurelia Castillo de González, Mercedes Matamoros and Nieves Xenes. The latter were all outstanding poetesses, but no one more so than their countrywoman and predecessor: GERTRUDIS GOMEZ DE AVELLANEDA (1814-1873),<sup>2</sup> one of the great figures of Spanish Romanticism. Although she rightfully belongs to the literary history of the Peninsula because most of her work was produced there, the fact that she was born in Cuba, and that her personality was fully formed when she went to Spain, gives her work a distinct quality which is definitely American and Cuban. The many years she spent in Spain did not change her American character, nor her attitude to her native country, thoughts of which always evoked tender, poignant and fond recollections, and where, as a Cuban poetess, she was presented with a gold “laurel wreath” by Luisa Pérez de Zambrana on her triumphant return in 1860.

Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda was born in 1814, of Spanish and Cuban parentage, in Santa María de Puerto Príncipe (now Camagüey), where she lived until her twenty-second year. Her father, Don Manuel de Avellaneda, a Spanish naval captain, died when she was very young, and her mother, Doña Francisca de Arteaga, married the Spanish colonel Escalada who, in 1836,<sup>3</sup> took the family to Spain.

*Tula*—as she was affectionately called—a child of the tropics, felt physically and spiritually chilled in the northern, foreign clime of Escalada's Galician home. It was not until two years later, however, that she and her brother paid a long-awaited visit to their father's southern

<sup>1</sup> Cf. María Monvel, *Poetisas de América*, dubbed by a caustic critic “la antología de la indecencia” . . .

<sup>2</sup> See M. Aramburu y Machado, *Personalidad literaria de Doña G. G. de A.*, Madrid, 1898; E. Bernal, “G. G. de A.: Su vida y su obra,” in *Cuba contemporánea*, Habana, 1925, XXXVII, 85-111; A. Castillo de González, *Biografía de G. G. de A.*, Habana, 1887; J. M. Chacón y Calvo, *Ensayos críticos de literatura cubana*, Madrid, 1922; E. Cotarelo y Mori, *La Avellaneda y sus obras*, Madrid, 1930; L. Cruz de Fuentes, *La Avellaneda. Autobiografía y cartas . . . hasta ahora inéditas*. Huelva, 1907; 2nd ed., Madrid, 1914; D. Figarola-Caneda, *G. G. de A., biografía, bibliografía e iconografía . . .*, Madrid, 1929; E. L. Kelly, “Bibliografía de la Avellaneda,” in *Revista Bimestre Cubana*, Habana, 1935, XXXV, 107-139, 261-295; R. Marquina, *G. G. de A., La Peregrina*, Habana, 1939; M. Menéndez y Pelayo, *Historia de la poesía hispano-americana*, Tomo I, Madrid, 1911, pp. 264-271; E. Piñeyro, *El romanticismo en España*, Paris, [1904], pp. 233-253.

<sup>3</sup> One of her best known poems, the sonnet “Al partir,” was, she says, improvised as the boat left the shores of Cuba—that “beloved Eden” that was always to evoke in her nostalgic thoughts.

province of Andalucía. But in 1840 she left the warmth of Cádiz and Seville for Madrid where she found the intellectual climate that best suited her.

She had already published some poems under the apt pseudonym of *La Peregrina*, and was hailed as a great promise by all who were duly impressed not only by her indubitable talent but also by her great and imposing beauty. In spite—or, perhaps, because—of this, she was destined to be another of love's tragic puppets, for her life is a martyred mirror of ungratified desires and trenchant grief. If in some poems she unburdens her tortured soul, one must read her letters to come to a full realization of the volcanic passion—never assuaged—which burned within her throughout the greater part of her life. It was only when she found spiritual anchorage in religion that her much-maligned and afflicted spirit found peace.

Her literary activities were prolific and varied, for she cultivated the novel, the drama, poetry and translation. But like most writers of the romantic period in Spain, she proved most original and successful in the field of lyric poetry and poetic drama. Her poems—of mundane and religious inspiration—rank among the best of that fruitful period of Spanish literature. Her collected poems also include some free translations of Parny and Victor Hugo; imitations of Sappho, Petrarch, Parny, Lamartine, Hugo and Byron; some paraphrases of Biblical hymns and psalms; conventional poems to other authors of the day (Pastor Díaz, Gallego, Zorrilla, Quintana), to illustrious personages and friends, and several necrological ones (Heredia, Espronceda, Quintana).

If, although somewhat externally, she was to come under the influence of three great poets of her day—her compatriot Heredia, and the Spaniards Quintana and Gallego—she was, in many ways, almost their antithesis. The patriotic and descriptive note which characterized the verse of the Cuban pre-Romanticist, was present, but in a manner totally different in “la Avellaneda.” Her “patriotism” can be said to be no more than a nostalgic, sentimental evocation of that beloved, palm-shaded isle that nurtured her<sup>1</sup>; her descriptions of nature, more a romantic reflection of her spiritual moods than the grandiose spectacle that inspired the sonorous

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<sup>1</sup> *Allá do cruzan arroyos  
Sus cristalinas guirnaldas,  
En torno de agrestes seibas,  
De erguidos cedros y palmas;  
A cuyos pies—y al abrigo  
De sus siempre frescas ramas—  
Florece el útil cacao,  
Se mece la dulce caña,  
Y el cálido café luce  
Sus pulidas flores blancas . . .*

“En el album de una señorita cubana.”

*Donde el cedro y la caoba  
Confunden sus grandes ramas,*

verse of the poet of "Niágara." The civic note which was characteristic of Quintana was only superficially present in Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda—when she wished to shower praise, or adulation, on some high personage, or on her good friend, Queen Isabella II herself. Nor was the academic, serene, unruffled Classicism of Gallego an essential feature of Avellaneda's verse, which frequently revealed an inner disturbance that overflowed the classic norms of expression.

Because of the fact that many of her poems were inspired by what one could term objective themes, she has often been called "an impersonal poet." Her lyric production, for the most part, has been considered *virile* in tone. But Menéndez y Pelayo sensed the depth of her feeling, and her femininity, when he said of her:<sup>1</sup>

La Avellaneda era mujer y muy mujer y precisamente lo mejor que hay en su poesía son sentimientos de mujer . . . Lo que la hace inmortal, no sólo en la poesía lírica española, sino en la de cualquier otro país o tiempo, es la expresión, ya indómita y soberbia, ya mansa y resignada, ya ardiente e impetuosa, ya mística y profunda de todos los anhelos, tristezas, pasiones, desencantos, tormentas y naufragios del alma femenina.

Her poetry, therefore, of indubitable feminine cast, has been a signal, distinct and valuable contribution to modern Spanish verse—so rich in its masculine talents.

Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda died in 1873, at the age of 59, and although more than once it has been suggested that her remains be brought to Cuba, which she so loved, they still remain in Seville. We can repeat, therefore, what she herself said to her native land upon the death of Heredia:

*Ya enmudeció tu cisne peregrino . . .  
¿Quién cantará tus brisas y tus palmas,  
Tu sol de fuego, tu brillante cielo? . . .  
Ostenta sí, tu duelo;  
Que en ti rodó su venturosa cuna,  
Por ti clamaba en el destierro impío,  
Y hoy condena la pérfida fortuna  
A suelo extraño su cadáver frío,  
Do tus arroyos, ¡ay!, con su murmullo  
No darán a su sueño blando arrullo . . .*

("A la muerte de Heredia")

*Y el yarey y el cocotero  
Sus lindas pencas enlazan:  
Donde el naranjo y la piña  
Vierten al par su fragancia:  
Donde responde sonora  
A vuestros besos la caña:  
Donde ostentan los cafetos  
Sus flores de filigrana  
Y sus granos de rubies  
Y sus hojas de esmeraldas.*

"La vuelta a la patria."

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 265.



## II

### MODERNISM: THE FORERUNNERS

The feminine literature of the 20th century can be said to be wholly a new product, and one of the last consequences of the modernist movement of the end of the 19th century. During Modernismo proper—the most original, fecund, and brilliant period in the literary annals of Spanish America—there was not a single woman among the many great poets who then appeared. The movement was decidedly masculine in character, in spite of the fact that the nature of the works was essentially lyrical, and that most of the writers possessed a highly emotional nature, and a hypersensitivity which might even be termed “feminine.”

The modernist “trend” was a personal movement; it had no rules to follow—no tenets. It was, decidedly, not a school, for its main characteristic was that each writer stamped his work with his own personality. This resulted in works of a highly individualistic and original nature. And, although it is known that feminine literature flourishes and thrives in periods of stylistic freedom and emotivity—such as Romanticism—it is also true that as women are not creative, as they tend to follow patterns rather than form them, they must wait until the literary mode crystallizes before attempting to emulate the work of the innovators. This proved to be the case with Spanish American women writers between the years 1888-1905 which are, roughly, those which set the limits to the modernist movement.

It is not that women ceased to write during that time, but those that did “attempt the pen” were in a secondary place in relation to the men, because they were either too conservative, and limited themselves to the continuing of the preceding, established, literary modes, or if they did essay the new manner—essentially innovative and revolutionary—they did so somewhat timidly, assimilating merely its most superficial and cursory notes. This state of vacillation between the old and the new lends to the work of the women poets of the end of the past century a heterogeneous character which will best be illustrated by the example of three of the most original poetesses who began to write before Delmira Agustini.

## MARÍA ENRIQUETA

*Quede para espíritus menos sombríos  
cantar la Alegría y la Vida: yo sólo  
cantaré el Dolor y la Muerte . . .*  
(Del tapiz de mi vida)

One of the first feminine voices of undisputed merit to sound in the midst of this literary renovation, but which partook of little of its modernity, was that of a Mexican poetess whose soft, melancholy verses (of the more subdued, muted tone which characterized the autumnal stages of Romanticism) bore the signature of *María Enriqueta*. And although she rejected, as foreign to her temperament and sensibility, the more fiery and rhetorical aspects of the so-called romantic school, she retains—to this day—that mellow lyricism tinged with sadness, that melancholic strain, that highly emotional quality, that inherent sentimentality, that projection of self into surrounding nature, which we might term “Romanticism of temperament.”

Having lived through a quarter of the 19th century—she was born in 1875—María Enriqueta Camarillo y Roa de Pereyra seems to have retained more of its spirit than that which prevails in the present one. She has no use for the new modes,<sup>1</sup> “which pass like the waters of the rivers,” and her latest volume of poetry, *Poemas del campo*, published in 1935, could, esthetically, have been produced in 1894 when, under the exotic and masculine pseudonym of *Iván Moszkowski*, she saw her first poem in print. And because she has let the literary fashions go by, and has never succumbed to the new influences, she has more than once been called “antiquated” and “outmoded.”<sup>2</sup>

Born in Coatepec—“tierra del liquidámbar, del jinicuil y el naranjo”—in the state of Veracruz, she was taken to the city of Mexico at a very early age. She studied music in the Conservatory under Meneses, who inspired her first tale: *El maestro Floriani*. She proved so apt a pupil that she was afterwards to become a teacher there herself, as well as a concert pianist of no small renown. Her marriage to the Mexican historian and diplomat, Carlos Pereyra, undoubtedly cut short this career. Because of his calling they have lived in most of the important cities of Europe, but the many literary currents with which she has come in contact through the years have never affected her own characteristic, simple style. Nor has this widening of her horizon changed her perceptively in any other way, for she still tends to be what some would term “provincial.”

Her emotions are conditioned by the simple tragedies. And she does

<sup>1</sup> “La moda siempre ridícula, incompetente . . . y necia.” (*Del tapiz de mi vida*, p. 219).

<sup>2</sup> “Muy siglo diecinueve, María Enriqueta es una poetisa que pasó . . . El cuento de la abuelita ya no nos conmueve, pero le escuchamos respetuosos, en razón de sus cabellos blancos” . . . (M. Monvel, *Poetisas de América*, p. 151).

not suffer from the spiritual debacles and frustrations that are patent in the more decadent and refined poetry which is stirred by what is called the "new sensibility." Thus, while Juana Borrero, María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira, Delmira Agustini, and so many others perish in the flames of neurosis and mental anguish that devour them, María Enriqueta leads a life with a calm unruffled by metaphysical and psychic cataclysms, but made dolorous, nonetheless, by what these tormented poetesses would call the *trivia* of life. Her poetry, however, although inspired by "the little things"—which seem to have no transcendental significance—is endowed with a true, deep, rich emotion that elevates it to a very high poetic plane.

María Enriqueta finds poetry in the most current and simple things—in those emotions, scenes and objects which, because of their familiarity, and "insignificance," often pass unnoticed in our harried life. She is, indeed, much more impressed with the small things than with the grandiose—in nature, in life, in emotion. And her father prophesized rightly when she was a child, for he said: "She will be awed by Aeschylus, but she will weep with Bécquer" . . .

Her aim in art, as well as in life, is simple and unpretentious. She does not aspire to "the divine laurel" with her "rustic flute." She treads the humbler paths, and writes her poems without thought of fame, without "gesture"—merely to gladden herself therewith. That is her "aspiración sencilla":

*Justo es que aspiren al laurel divino  
Los que al vaciar su estrofa en molde puro,  
Cíñense a él, como a la copa el vino.  
Ganar ese laurel yo no procuro,*

*Porque es otro, y humilde, mi camino.  
¡Siga el hábil, con ánimo seguro,  
Buscando honor para su verso o trino!  
Yo me conformo con el nombre oscuro*

*Del que entona, sin miras, su querella.  
Bajo naves acordes con la acústica,  
No pretende mi canto dejar huella:*

*Quiero, alumbrada por alguna estrella,  
Tocar, como el pastor, mi flauta rústica,  
¡Sólo para alegrarme yo con ella! . . .*

(Album sentimental)

She is, essentially, a painter of the home and of the hearth, and of the simple household duties that are so much a part of a woman of her type. Gabriela Mistral once said that her poetry had much in common with the Dutch painting of interiors. There is a quiet dignity and warmth in her descriptions of these homely tasks, of the furniture and rooms, which so many other poetesses—engrossed in the turmoil of their erotic and psychic



desires and woes—tend to overlook, perhaps disdain. And she has a deep, tender and sentimental attachment for the home: its setting, its contents, and all it signifies; a need to feel herself surrounded by familiar things. That is why, on the eve of her first departure from her native land, she made a spiritual and sentimental inventory of all she grieved to leave behind:

. . . un huertecillo rebosante de rosas y geranios; los muros que lo cierran, donde las lagartijas amigas toman sol . . . Un gato soñador . . . macetas con alelúes . . . un banco de piedra, donde, obligada por la canción de las brisas errantes, he tejido algunos versos . . . Y dentro de esos cuatro muros, la casa; y en ella, mis recuerdos todos . . . Aquí estaba el piano . . . Allí los espejos y los cuadros . . . Allá mis libros . . . En aquel rincón sombrío dos retratos absortos . . .

(*Del tapiz de mi vida*)

And that is why, too, like Chopin, she feels the need to carry with her—wherever she may be—a handful of her native soil . . .

María Enriqueta is a poetess whose pen—as she declares in *Del tapiz de mi vida*—always writes *with black ink*. And even though she claims that she does not disdain laughter, she confesses that in art she considers “more noble that which provokes tears.” Life for her is synonymous with pain, and her greatest pleasure consists in knowing that she shall nevermore find gladness in this world. Her favorite time of year is autumn—“that divine season of fogs”—with its bleakness, its sighing winds, its withered leaves, its loneliness . . .

She scorns those “impotents of literature” who, enslaved by “the mode,” wish to rid their verse of sentiment and tears; and following her own precepts, with an arrogant disdain for what she calls “fashion,” she tends to play to satiety on that dolorous, tearful chord that constitutes the mainspring of her poetic inspiration.

And so she persistently, and invariably, sings of life’s sorrows, of the pain of unrequited love, of the torture of seeing hope vanish forever, of her loneliness—profound and desolate:

. . . Los que ven, dos a dos, cruzar las aves  
Por los abiertos horizontes suaves,  
No han visto en su abandono y sus congojas  
El ave entre los árboles sin hojas . . .  
Yo estaré así cual ave entristecida  
Que va, sola, cruzando por la vida . . .

(Rumores de mi huerto: “*Lejos*”)

Y después . . . con el rostro  
hundido entre las manos:  
—Sola ¡Ya! me diré—¡Por siempre sola!—  
. . . Y en un rincón me quedaré llorando . . .

(Rumores de mi huerto: “*¡Sola!*”)

Ya sin tu amor, a solas  
A solas con mi alma,  
Bajo el sauce sombrío

.....  
Se estremece la hiedra  
Que en el muro descansa . . .  
. . . Al fin quedé ya sola,  
Cual hoja mustia que arrincona el agua . . .

(Rumores de mi huerto: "Olvido")

But although emotion rules her verse, its main characteristic is that of restraint, of moderation, which is, perhaps, due to her Mexican temperament and character which have the hermetic quality of leaving so much unsaid. Her poems are, for the most part, brief. And they disclose an avowed dislike for ostentation—artistically and emotionally.

In all her books of verse—and notably in *Poemas del campo*—one discerns her great devotion for nature; an idyllic fervor for "the tree, the mount, the valley," which she attributes to the fact that she first saw the light of day in that "paradisiacal spot" which is Coatepec.<sup>1</sup> But although she loves nature as a whole, she prefers—as in life, as in all else—its bleaker aspects: "the rain, the fogs, the moaning of the wind," which, she says, constitute her greatest joy.<sup>2</sup>

More versatile than most of the other poetesses, she not only writes verse, but is, probably, more successful in the field of fiction—novels, short stories, and tales—which, as she says, she prefers to all other modes of literary expression because of its infinite scope. She has also written several books for children and some essays. Most of her poems are contained in four books whose titles define their content, character, modality and style better, perhaps, and more succinctly, than any critical comment: *Rumores de mi huerto* (1908), *Rincones románticos* (1922), *Album sentimental* (1926), and *Poemas del campo* (1935).

Although she has great lyric depth and emotion, she is particularly adept at the narrative type of poem which so many of the poetesses neglect, or are incapable of producing. Her last book, *Poemas del campo*, contains several fine examples of what might be called "fiction in rhyme."

Her poetry, today, sounds a somewhat different note in the symphony of the erotic muses. And so, while she is, undoubtedly, the first important poetess of the century, she is in a class apart, and does not fit adequately into the pattern of the new feminine poetry, with its daring, its freedom—both stylistically and emotionally.

Closer to "the new mode," although chronologically her antecedent, is the Cuban Juana Borrero—that "adolescente atormentada" who has

<sup>1</sup> . . . "aquel rincón paradisiaco—al que atribuyo mi gran fervor por la Naturaleza, ya que la bella Coatepec está rodeada de incomparables campiñas." (Prologue to *Poemas de campo*).

<sup>2</sup> "La lluvia, las neblinas y el gemir del viento forman mi mayor delicia." (*Fantasia y realidad*, p. 89).

more than once been compared to María Bashkirseff—and, certainly, María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira of Uruguay, the immediate predecessor of Delmira Agustini who was to be her fecund heir in art, in spirit and in tragedy.

### JUANA BORRERO

. . . *En ti veo la tristeza*  
*De los seres que deben morir temprano . . .*  
 (CASAL)

A member of the well-known Borrero family<sup>1</sup> of Cuba, Juana was born in Havana in 1878, and died, at the early age of eighteen, in the United States. Her poems which have much in common—in mood, sensibility and form—with those of her sad and life-weary contemporaries and friends: the “master” Julián del Casal, and the Uhrbach brothers, are characterized by their note of pessimism and deep melancholy, by their elegance and delicacy of form, and by a pictoric quality which reveals her as the true artist that she was in painting as well as in poetry.

Juana was barely twelve when, filled with admiration for the already famous poet whose verses so miraculously seemed to re-echo her own dismal feelings and thoughts, she met the great Julián del Casal.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> She was the daughter of the great teacher, poet, physician and patriot, Esteban Borrero Echevarría. The poetic tradition was especially rich and fecund in her family. Her paternal grandfather, Esteban de Jesús Borrero, was a poet—as were his three gifted children: Esteban, Manuel and Elena. On her mother's side she was related to one of the greatest woman poets of all time: Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda. Her maternal aunt, Martina Pierra de Poo, was also a poetess of note, and her sister, Dulce María Borrero, figures prominently in Spanish American feminine literature.

<sup>2</sup> Shortly afterward he wrote his famous “Busto” of Juana, in which he also included her poetic portrait:

*Tez de ámbar, labios rojos,  
 Pupilas de terciopelo,  
 Que más que el azul del cielo  
 Ven del mundo los abrojos.  
 Cabellera azabachada  
 Que, en ligera ondulación,  
 Como velo de crespón  
 Cubre su frente tostada.  
 Ceño que a veces arruga,  
 Abriendo en su alma una herida  
 La realidad de la vida  
 O de una ilusión la fuga.  
 Mejillas suaves de raso  
 En que la vida fundiera  
 La palidez de la cera,  
 La púrpura del ocaso.*

*¿Su boca? Rojo clavel  
 Quemado por el estío,  
 Mas donde vierte el hastio  
 Gotas amargas de hiel.  
 Seno en que el dolor habita  
 De una ilusión engañosa  
 Como negra mariposa  
 En fragante margarita.  
 Manos que para el laurel  
 Que a alcanzar su genio aspira,  
 Ora recorren la lira,  
 Ora mueven el pincel.  
 ¡Doce años! Mas sus facciones  
 Veló ya de honda amargura  
 La tristeza prematura  
 De los grandes corazones.*

He, in turn, inspired several of the young girl's poems, such as the ingenuous “Cantares”:

*Bajo tus ojos azules  
 Mis ilusiones se abrieron  
 Como las flores se abren  
 Bajo la lumbre del cielo*

and others where she, who had that “premature sadness,” which he divined in her, spoke of her “horas de insomnio,” her “locos sueños,” her “alma enferma,” her “dolor recóndito,” her “martirio,” her “nostalgia” . . .



author of *Hojas al viento* and *Nieve* was then more than twice her age, and already suffering, physically and mentally, from a morbid neurosis and a feeling of tedium, of void, which are reflected in so many of his strange verses. His feelings for the "virgen triste" that was Juana were, doubtless, warm but Platonic;<sup>1</sup> hers, those impassioned ones which a hypersensitive, highly emotional and talented adolescent has for an idol. He died in 1893, while she was studying painting in the United States. This tragic end to her adolescent dream of love plunged her still deeper into melancholy:

*Junto a la cripta muda donde mi amor reposa  
No crece el verde césped ni la fragante flor;  
Así, en mi alma, tumba de mil venturas muertas,  
La flor de la esperanza tampoco germinó.  
El cielo transparente que sobre mí fulgura  
No es el radiante cielo que busca mi dolor.  
Mi cielo eran sus ojos, sus ojos de zafiro,  
Cuya radiosa lumbre por siempre se nubló!*

("Dolorosa")

And it was not until she met another poet, Carlos Pío Uhrbach,<sup>2</sup> also a disciple and admirer of Casal's, and whose sorrow-filled soul seemed to

<sup>1</sup> In a poem dedicated to Juana ("Virgen triste") he speaks of the warm, brotherly affection he bore her: "¡Ah!, yo siempre te adoro como un hermano" . . .

<sup>2</sup> Born in Matanzas in 1872. In 1894 he published the book *Gemelas* with his brother Federico—dedicated "to the memory of the master Julián del Casal." The poems which he left at his death (1897) were to appear ten years later in the book *Oro* which his brother edited and which, like the first one, also included compositions by both. Typical of the tedium, the void, the weariness which his "sickly soul" and "somber spirit" engendered and reflected, is the poem "Enclaustrado":

*Sólo en mi corazón reina el hastío  
Como un déspota audaz que se entroniza;  
Lo que ayer me sedujo, hoy me horroriza,  
Y encuentro el mundo en derredor vacío.  
La nostalgia del claustro mudo y frío,  
En mi alma soñadora y enfermiza,  
Como fragante flor, aromatiza  
Las ansias de mi espíritu sombrío.  
¡Ay!, yo aspiro a las dichas ideales;  
Los efímeros goces terrenales  
Engendraron el tedio en mis placeres.  
Pueblan mis sueños vírgenes con tocas,  
Y no me encienden las sangrientas bocas  
Con que besan las pálidas mujeres*

which recalls Casal's "tedio profundo" and "nihilismo":

*Ansias de aniquilarme sólo siento  
O de vivir en mi eternal pobreza  
Con mi fiel compañero, el descontento,  
Y mi pálida novia la tristeza . . .*

("Nihilismo")

*¡Ah, los muertos deseos! Nada ansío  
De lo que el mundo ofrece ante mi vista:  
Aquello que mi alma no contrista  
Tan sólo me produce amargo hastío . . .*

("Oración")

have a strange affinity with hers, that her life, so long devoid of "the clear light of the sun of hope," once more emerged from the shadows of the deep night of her spirit. As her passion for him grew "with all the nostalgia" of her "sick soul," she felt the need to weep before the dead one's tomb "the supreme shame of involuntary consolation" . . .<sup>1</sup>

But that "tortura del consuelo," of which she spoke, was short-lived; for, as a result of her father's active part in the movement to liberate Cuba, the family was forced to emigrate to Key West. There she was to die—"sick and lonely, dolorous and sad"—without the comfort of again seeing her lover, to whom she had written heart-breaking letters that were filled with the terror and certainty of death, and the urgency to have him near:

Ya mi único anhelo es verte otra vez, y después la muerte definitiva y desoladora . . . Ven, te lo suplico, te lo ruego, te lo grito por última vez . . . Espero que comprendas la solemnidad angustiosa de esta súplica. Ven; ya no tengo fuerzas para esperar más . . . Tengo el temor horrible de morir sin verte . . .

Carlos Pío was not to mourn her long, for several months later he himself died on the battle-field.

Juana Borrero is noted especially for her sonnets—some of which, as Darío said, are "most strange," and filled with "a mystic sensualism" reminiscent of Casal. One of the best is "Las hijas de Ran":

*Envueltas entre espumas diamantinas  
Que salpican sus cuerpos sonrosados,  
Por los rayos del sol iluminados,  
Surgen del mar en grupo las ondinas.  
Cubriendo sus espaldas peregrinas  
Descienden los cabellos destrenzados,  
Y al rumor de las olas van mezclados  
Los ecos de sus risas argentinas.  
Así viven contentas y dichosas  
Entre el cielo y el mar, regocijadas,  
Ignorando tal vez que son hermosas,  
Y que las olas, entre sí rivales,  
Se entrechocan, de espumas coronadas,  
Por estrechar sus formas virginales.*

Her poems—some of which had previously appeared in the most select

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and Juana's similar complaints:

*En mi pecho solloza el fastidio  
Y me agobia profunda nostalgia:  
La belleza inmortal de Natura,  
El engaño feliz de la infancia,  
La memoria de días tranquilos,  
El recuerdo de dichas pasadas  
No han podido llenar un instante  
El bastío que siento en el alma . . .*

<sup>1</sup> "Vengo a llorar ante tu fosa la pesadumbre de haberme consolado! Vengo a llorar la tortura del consuelo, la suprema vergüenza de la conformidad involuntaria" . . . (Angel I. Augier, "Juana Borrero, la adolescente atormentada," in *Páginas*, Habana, 1937, I, p. 113).

Cuban periodicals of the time: *La Habana Elegante* and *El Figaro*—form but one book, modestly called *Rimas* (1895), probably in acknowledgment of the debt that she, like countless others, owed Bécquer.

Casal included his silhouette<sup>1</sup> of the child-poet in his *Bustos y rimas* (1893) among those of some of the most outstanding Cuban personalities of the day: Ricardo del Monte, Enrique José Varona, Aurelia Castillo de González, Esteban Borrero Echevarría, Bonifacio Byrne . . . He discerned in her more genius than talent. And, although in the matter of style—and sometimes, emotion—she was not too far beyond the romantic patterns, in thought and sensibility she aligned herself with the new poets of Cuba of whom Casal, one of the outstanding precursors of Modernism, was the undisputed master.

Her work, although necessarily brief, and not fully “achieved,” was, nonetheless, more than a promise. In the history of modern Spanish American feminine poetry which culminates with Delmira Agustini—and the other great poetesses who followed soon after in her wake—there is a meritorious place for that “sad virgin” whom Casal, prophetically, found prematurely filled with “that sadness of the ones who are to die young” . . .

#### MARIA EUGENIA VAZ FERREIRA

*Brasa de castidad fría de angustia,  
Porque jamás supisteis ofrendaros . . .*

(VASSEUR)

Closer still—in tone and manner—to Delmira Agustini and her followers, is the tragic Uruguayan poetess María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira, “the bride of loneliness” . . .

Born in 1875,—nearly ten years before Delmira Agustini, and fully two decades before the other great poetess of Uruguay, Juana de Ibarbourou—María Eugenia’s contribution to this new literature by women in Spanish America has not been duly recognized nor acknowledged. For, although not as fully “emancipated,” perhaps, as those who profited by her artistic and spiritual immolation, she, undoubtedly, heralded this new epoch of full literary freedom for women in Latin America.

Being highly individualistic and self-willed in a period when feminine society bowed unquestionably to rules and traditions, she was often considered strange and more than once termed “queer” by others who were more willing than she to be one of the fold. She was fond of doing things to disconcert people. And, although some censured this defiant attitude of hers, others found it charmingly “bizarre.” Delmira Agustini, in her column *La legión etérea* (a section of the popular Montevidean weekly,

<sup>1</sup> See p. 46, note 2.



*La Alborada*), dedicated to the socially and artistically prominent women of the day, wrote of her:

Todo en ella es encantador, desde su vigoroso talento poético hasta sus deliciosas extravagancias de niña ligeramente voluntariosa; y ¡pensar que tal vez hay personas lo bastante malignas para reprobárselas! ¡ignorantes! Quitad el fulgor a un astro y dejará de serlo; quitad el perfume a una rosa, y será algo así como un cadáver embalsamado . . . ; quitad a *María Eugenia* sus caprichos, y dejará de ser *María Eugenia* . . .

Her tragedy was, mainly, that "soledad de incomprendidos" of which Vasseur, another self-styled "desterrado," wrote. For she felt stifled, and spiritually dwarfed, in a milieu that did not—and, perhaps, *could not*—sense the tragic significance of her "strangeness."

Yet for a time *María Eugenia*, who wilfully and capriciously sought in various ways to "épater le bourgeois,"—as she herself admitted—became somewhat of the spoiled darling of a group that recognized, admired and pampered her intelligence, her charm, her talent, her vanity, her daring . . . But when a new, and still more luminous and audacious poetess, *Delmira Agustini*, came to the fore—and was hailed as "the greatest of them all"—her pride, accustomed to unrivaled adulation, suffered a cruel blow. Before her death she was to see herself twice eclipsed, for another feminine poetic star came into the ascendant with the advent of the young, sensuous *Juana de Ibarbourou* (who completed the trio of great Uruguayan poetesses).

In the last few years of her life, with no regard for personal appearance, she was a lonely wanderer in the streets of Montevideo; a familiar and tragic figure—no longer the proud girl whose black, velvety eyes seemed to sound strange, inner depths; nor she who could charm listeners with her melodious contralto voice as she recited newly-coined verses, confident of ever-ready applause and admiration.

Thus, embittered, and chained to a life of spiritual and emotional sterility, devoid of warmth, this poetess was to die very shortly after her reason—that capricious reason that made her so exigent of things human—had totally left her.

Replete with idiosyncrasies and phobias,<sup>1</sup> *María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira* must have been a difficult person. Ever since the beginning of her poetic

<sup>1</sup> "La última vez que *María Eugenia* habló conmigo acababa ella de componer la poesía que, en ese momento, consideraba superior a todas las otras suyas. Es la que se titula '*El regreso*.' Me dijo que me la recitaría con la condición de que a nadie se la repitiera, porque rodando y rodando referencias sobre la misma, alguien podría robarle sus ideas y publicirlas como cosa propia antes que ella." (Lauzar, in *Pegaso*, Montevideo, 1924, VIII, p. 263).—"Cuando se fundó en Montevideo la Universidad de Mujeres . . . pidió un puesto, considerando que su país, que no le había dado nada . . . era lo menos que podía darle . . . fué la forma en que lo planteó ella considerando que lo que ella pedía no era una dádiva que se le otorgaba, sino una obligación que hacía tiempo tenía el país pendiente con ella; y así entiendo que lo argumentó, con la altivez característica de todos sus actos, al presentarse a

career she had been urged to publish a book, but with her characteristic distaste for all public demonstration<sup>1</sup> which had in it, perhaps, a grain of pose—or, *to be different*—she had avoided the aim of all writers: to see their work take the form of a book. Shortly before her death, however, she did entrust to her brother, the philosopher Carlos Vaz Ferreira, the proofs of the long-awaited book, in the event that death should claim her before its completion. Of all of her thirty years of fruitful production, but forty-one poems gain entrance to *La isla de los cánticos*, her only book, published posthumously. She knew best, and included in it only those poems which show her in her maturity, and not those earlier ones which disclose interesting sources, but which do not yet sound her true poetic depth.

In her first poems one discerns the current influence of the French romantic poets—notably Musset—, of Bécquer and of Heine. But these sweet, melancholy, sentimental effusions were short-lived in her poetic cycle, and were soon eclipsed and silenced by the more sonorous, rotund and reverberating verses in the manner of the Mexican Díaz Mirón and the Uruguayan Vasseur. It was not, however, until her own style crystallized and culminated in poems like “Los desterrados,” “El ataúd flotante,” “Invocación,” “El regreso,” “Unico poema” . . . that María Eugenia reached the peak of her creative and artistic power.

Her best and most characteristic work reflects but one thought, one idea, one ambition, one need: flight—escape—into the earth, into the

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pedir, a reclamar el puesto. Se le nombró secretaria y además se le dieron las cátedras de literatura correspondientes a los diversos cursos de enseñanza secundaria. En su puesto administrativo se condujo con una gracia de niño travieso. No recuerdo que se haya llevado bien con ninguna de las decanas . . . Llegó un momento en que las relaciones entre decana y secretaria fueron tan tirantes que aquélla le quitó toda intervención en el trabajo administrativo. Entonces se le presentó un caso de conciencia, gravísimo . . . en una persona que tenía un sentido agudo del honor . . . ¿cómo podía honestamente cobrar el sueldo sin trabajar? Y para hacer algo, para demostrarse a ella misma que trabajaba, que no era regalado el sueldo que a fin de mes cobraba, limpiaba los bronce de todas las puertas ante las miradas absortas de sus discípulas.” (O. Ramírez, in *Repertorio Americano*, Costa Rica, Feb. 24, 1934).—“Hablan muchos de las rarezas y de las actitudes inexplicables de María Eugenia . . . ¿Citar aquella imperiosa necesidad que la obligaba a tocar la tierra por tres veces, todas las noches, a las doce de la noche, hallase donde se hallase? ¿. . . aquel terror que la dominaba de no poder salir, de quedarse enclaustrada en alguna habitación, o casa, o teatro? ¿. . . aquella sutilísima, pero insoportable preocupación, cuando se hallaba en el teatro, de que no iba a poder ver el fin de la obra o del concierto, porque, fatalmente, de un momento a otro se iban a apagar las luces?” (E. Oribe, in *Repertorio Americano*, San José, Costa Rica, 1930, XXI, núm. 5).

<sup>1</sup> “ . . . quizás como nadie, sintió la repugnancia a ciertas manifestaciones de la publicidad, por ejemplo: a la exhibición de su libro en las vidrieras.” (T. Manacorda, in *Pegaso*, Montevideo, 1924, VIII, p. 251).—“Alfredo A. Bianchi, director de *Nosotros*, quería pedirle colaboración a María Eugenia. Fué llevado a la casa de la poetisa por Salaverri. María Eugenia se avino a darle un par de composiciones, pero le exigió que no pusiera la firma al final sino al principio de todo en letras casi invisibles. El nombre al final le parecía ‘jactancioso’ . . . Estaba dispuesta a que se hiciera un libro de sus poemas dispersos pero exigía que ‘una vez concluida la obra, se empaquetaría, depositándola en un sótano sin que la viera nadie.’” (V. A. Salaverri, “Recordando a María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira,” in *Nosotros*, Buenos Aires, 1924, XLVII, 193-198.)

night, into the void . . . She longed to return to the earth—inviolate, as she had been delivered by it:

*He de volver a ti, propicia tierra,  
Como una vez surgi de tus entrañas,  
Con un sacro dolor de carne viva  
Y la pasividad de las estatuas.  
He de volver a ti gloriosamente,  
Triste de orgullos arduos e infecundos,  
Con la ofrenda vital inmaculada.*

*Alguna vez me llamarás de nuevo  
Y he de volver a ti, tierra propicia,  
Con la ofrenda vital inmaculada,  
En su sayal mortuorio toda envuelta  
Como en una bandera libertaria.*

(“El regreso”)

For she who felt her life was aimless, that she had “no road,” because her steps went “through the savage forest . . . in a perpetual, contradictory anxiety,” longed to put an end to her fear, her weariness, her solitary anguish; to give a last farewell to “the soundless enigma of desire”; to shut off tortured thought, and let it sink into that long sleep “without key and without the gleam of redemption”:

*Y no tengo camino;  
Mis pasos van por la salvaje selva  
En un perpetuo afán contradictorio . . .*

*Ah, si pudiera desatar un día  
La unidad integral que me aprisiona!  
Tirar los ojos con los astros quietos  
De un lago azul en la nocturna onda . . .*

*Darle el último adiós  
Al insondable enigma del deseo,  
Cerrar el pensamiento atormentado  
Y dejarlo dormir un largo sueño  
Sin clave y sin fulgor de redenciones . . .*

(“El regreso”)

Her spirit (weary, now, and sad from the workings of that “arduous and infecund” pride of hers) sought liberation—total annihilation—in death; or temporary forgetfulness in the starless, silent, soothing mantle of night—intoxicating, infinite night, haven of forgetfulness, and bestower of mute and negative delights:

*. . . noche embriagadora  
Hecha de soledad y de desesperanza . . .*



*Noche de las delicias mudas y negativas  
De que gozan los muertos vivos como fantasmas . . .*

*Noche, noche infinita, rincón de los olvidos,  
Perdón de penitentes que nunca hicieron nada  
Más que cargar a solas el pesado madero  
Sobre la ligereza cautiva de sus alas . . .*

*Yo no sé lo que dice tu boca abierta y muda  
Al que doró su tienda con oro de esperanza,  
Pero sé que sabes con amorosa ciencia  
Tenderte suavemente sobre el alma cansada!*

*Dale a los beneditos que todavía sueñan,  
Tus áureas lentejuelas y tu hostia de plata,  
Y a mí, que te deseo inextinguible y única,  
Dame la eternidad de tu silencio, oh Hermana.*

(“Invocación”)

Nothing in these tragic poems is real but her loneliness and desperation. Love itself is only an aspiration—a cult. And so she does not sing of the real, nor of a possible lover, as do most of the other poetesses, but of the ideal one—the potent, invulnerable, sapient, unique and inaccessible one: the *Superman*:

*Yo quiero un vencedor de toda cosa,  
Invulnerable, universal, sapiente,  
Inaccesible y único . . .*

(“Heroica”)

For she felt that to no other man could she give that “vital offering” which her body, afire in its cold and impervious sheath of marble, preserved intact and pure . . .

Her expression of love, therefore, is never sexual, nor sensuous; never blissful or “satisfied.” It is, rather,—especially in the last literary phase—a spiritual, crucial need to find that “conqueror of all things” for whom she was fated to wait in vain:

*Quebrantará en tu honra mi vieja rebeldía,  
Si sabe combatirme la ciencia de tu mano;  
Si tienes la grandeza de un templo soberano,  
Ofrendaré mi sangre para tu idolatría.  
Naufragará en tus brazos la prepotencia mía,  
Si tienes la profunda fruición del oceano,  
Y si sabes el ritmo de un canto sobrehumano,  
Silenciarán mis arpas su eterna melodía.*

*Me volveré paloma, si tu soberbia siente  
La garra vencedora del águila potente;  
Si sabes ser fecundo, seré tu floración,  
Y brotará una selva de cósmicas entrañas,  
Cuyas salvajes frondas románticas y hurañas  
Conquistará tu imperio si sabes ser león.*

("Holocausto")

And so her enforced virginity becomes her banner—a banner which she carries defiantly, with the bitterness of one who is cognizant of the strange make-up of her being: paradoxically endowed with "the sacred pain of live flesh and the passivity of statues!" In many of her poems one discerns the tortured accent of one who feels no personal control over her actions or her feelings, but, rather, the weight—or the caprice—of a Higher Power who so chose to mold her, with "the tranquility of serene shadow and the tragic gleam of a wild tempest":

*No sé cuando labraste el signo mío  
El crisol armonioso de tus gestas  
Dónde estaba . . .  
Dónde la proporción de tus designios . . .  
Tú me brotaste fantásticamente  
Con la quietud de la serena sombra  
Y el trágico fulgor de las borrascas . . .  
Tú me brotaste caprichosamente  
Alguna vez en que se confundieron  
Tus potencias en una sola ráfaga . . .*

("El regreso")

*Yo no sé en qué fantástica materia  
Al escultor de la prole humana  
Le plugo modelar la estatua mía,  
Que no ablanda la luz de las auroras  
Ni el oscuro crepúsculo marchita . . .*

("Canto verbal")

And as her spirit struggles to free itself from that maelstrom of "fire and marble"<sup>1</sup>—that "fantastic matter" with which "the Sculptor of human progeny" had ironically fashioned her "statue," one senses the timeless anguish of a soul stranded on the barren isle of hopelessness and solitude . . .

María Eugenia was undoubtedly a great poetess, but could, perhaps, have been still greater, had she not frustrated, in part, her artistic potentialities, as she had the personal ones. "She is worth even more than for the verses she composed"—says Salaverri<sup>2</sup> "for those she could, but was unwilling to write."

<sup>1</sup> *Fuego y mármol* had been the projected title of her book.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*

2

DELMIRA AGUSTINI

*Con alma fúlgida  
y carne sombría . . .*





## LIFE AND CHARACTER

The first woman who can truly be called a Modernist is Delmira Agustini—Uruguayan like María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira, who a decade earlier had, in the limited and somewhat negative aspect that we have seen, aligned herself with the followers of that great movement; and like Juana de Ibarbourou, who some years later was to follow in their path but in a manner distinctly her own.

Her life, like her work, was brief, but replete with intensity; for most of her twenty-eight years were spent in the poignant task of elaborating and voicing that great poem that was within her—devouring soul and body ("devorando alma y carne") to find adequate expression. It took seven years—from 1907, year of the publication of her first book, *El libro blanco*, to 1914, that of her tragic death—for that poem to take form, and the books that compose it are monument enough to the memory of that life, predestined to woe ("con el sello de un trágico destino").

It seems strange that the many critics who have dwelt upon her life should not have been able to furnish more conclusive information about one who lived so short a time ago—with baptismal records, family archives and other pertinent data so near at hand. Yet Parra del Riego (the compiler of an anthology of women poets),<sup>1</sup> Solar Correa<sup>2</sup> and, more recently, María Monvel,<sup>3</sup> give 1880 as the year of her birth; while the introduction to a selection of her poetry<sup>4</sup>, and González Ruano<sup>5</sup> make her ten years younger. And she herself, on at least one occasion that we know of, made a wilful—and characteristically feminine—change, stating at the time of her marriage (1913) that she was born in 1889. Most of the critics, however, coincide in saying that she was about twenty years old when she published her first book, *El libro blanco*, in 1907. Salaverri, in the edition of her *Obras completas* published in 1924, had already given the exact date of her birth: October 24, 1886, which is corroborated by Delmira Agustini's baptismal record which we reproduce here, we believe, for the first time:

El día ocho de Enero de mil ochocientos ochenta y siete el Presbítero Doctor Don Santiago Aretche, con licencia del infrascrito Cura Párroco de esta Catedral Basílica de Montevideo bautizó solemnemente en ella a Delmira que nació el día

<sup>1</sup> *Antología de poetisas americanas*, Montevideo, 1923.

<sup>2</sup> *Poetas de Hispano-América*, Santiago de Chile, 1926.

<sup>3</sup> *Poetisas de América*, Santiago de Chile, 1929.

<sup>4</sup> *Las mejores poesías (líricas) de los mejores poetas*, vol. XXXIX, Barcelona, [1923].

<sup>5</sup> *Poetisas modernas*, Madrid, 1924.

veinte y cuatro de Octubre del año mil ochocientos ochenta y seis, hija legítima de Santiago Agustini, oriental, y de María Murtfeldt, argentina; abuelos paternos: Domingo y Francisca Medina; abuelos maternos: Luis y Delmira Triaca. Fueron padrinos: Domingo Agustini y Dolores Murtfeldt, a quienes instruyo. Por verdad lo firmo. Rafael Yéregui.—(Folio 374 of the 49th Book of the Cathedral of Montevideo).

Although the blood of various races ran in her veins it would be incorrect to regard Delmira Agustini as anything but a typical Spanish American of mixed lineage, as so many of them are. And if some, misled by her Italian name, arrive at facile conclusions as to her immediate racial stock, it is known that, although the name is undoubtedly of Italian origin, her paternal grandfather, Domingo Agustini, was French. As far as we can determine, her immediate genealogy is the following:



There is a rare contrast between the simple, conventional, *bourgeois* environment—of home and community—in which this girl lived, and her inner self, so complex, so daring in its revelation; so far above all that surrounded her. And yet at home she must have been very happy, for her parents, who measured life in terms of Delmira, strove in every way to create a "climate" suitable to her strange ways.<sup>1</sup>

As a child she was extraordinarily precocious and sensitive. She learned to read and write at an age when most children are only acquiring the most elementary oral means of expression.<sup>2</sup> She was considered exceptional, and unduly serious, by all who came in contact with her; and when she reached adolescence she had already produced some poems that

<sup>1</sup> Some critics, like Suárez Calimano (in *Nosotros*, Buenos Aires, 1931, LXXII), censure this attitude of *laissez faire* on the part of her parents. A staying hand, they think, might have guided her to more normal paths of behavior; might have placed kind, but firm barriers, to that "voluntad imperiosa" which, undoubtedly, contributed largely to her tragedy. Manuel Ugarte, (in *Ariel*, San José, Costa Rica, 1939, XVIII, pp. 1342-1343), asserts that it was "in the bosom of the family" that she found the greatest opposition.

<sup>2</sup> According to Salaverri (Introd. to *Obras completas*, I, p. 12): "a los dos años . . . deletreaba; a los cuatro escribía."



were born of intuition and a keen poetic gift and were not merely the prattle of a child who had succumbed to the lure of rhyme.

She was never sent to school; and at home, first under the guidance of her mother, and later by more specialized teachers, she was taught the rudiments of culture, and those "adornments"—French, piano, painting, embroidery—deemed so necessary for the "genteel female" of the times.

Just how outstanding she might have been in the other arts we do not know. Some critics refer to her "puerile" attempts at painting, and to the "innocuous" little piano pieces with which she would regale admiring guests. Others, on the other hand, claimed for her undisputed mastery of the piano and praised her interpretation of the masters highly. Manuel de Castro<sup>1</sup> asserts that at ten Delmira Agustini was "una niña prodigiosa," and that Domingo Laporte, director of the Museum of Fine Arts and her painting instructor, confessed at the end of a year that there was nothing more he could teach her and suggested that she continue her studies in Europe; and that in a few months she had also exhausted the knowledge of her piano teacher.

Whatever her talents in the other arts may have been, at sixteen she felt the need to devote her life to writing; and so Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, whom she is said to have learned to interpret surprisingly well for one so young, and her painting, which she also loved, were relegated to the category of secondary interests.

Her contact with other children was slight, and, as she grew older, she continued to keep to herself, giving vent to that propensity to introspection so characteristic—and inevitable—in one of her temperament. She would spend hours, sometimes days, in the uninterrupted joy that her reading, her writing and other favored tasks afforded her.

It is said that she never attended the social functions that other young ladies of her class so readily sought to frequent; and that she had no friends of her age for she, of an austerity and seriousness of purpose so uncommon among women in that milieu, found little to interest her in their mundane and superficial affectations and frivolity. Later, she was to find friends more to her taste and manner in several of the outstanding literary figures of the day.

She was often seen walking in the park, always in the company of her parents; and every spring she went with the family to some property they had near Montevideo where André de Badet,<sup>2</sup> who writes of her so affectionately, and defends her so staunchly, had been her neighbor and friend since childhood. She is also known to have been a frequent visitor at Pocitos, the popular seaside resort, "donde"—writes Manuel de Castro—"preferentemente escribe." It is there that she met that "intelectual uruguayo, sobrino de un almirante argentino"—he of the "Wagnerian pro-

<sup>1</sup> In *Ercilla*, Santiago de Chile, 1939, IV, núm. 200, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> See his article: "Delmira Agustini," in *Revue Mondiale*, Paris, August 1, 1931, pp. 256-264.

file" and "pale hands"—who is said to have awakened in her a love of the magnitude and passion of that of which she sang in her poems. But, says Castro, "el idilio llega a un desenlace absurdo: las conveniencias sociales, la oposición familiar, lo truncan repentinamente."

There is no certainty as to how, or when, Delmira met Enrique Job Reyes, her future husband. He is said to have been an affable young man, handsome, muscular and self-assured, of a highly emotional nature, and accustomed to dominate. Undoubtedly sincere, he spoke lightly of her "failings": music and poetry. "She is a woman like the others," he would say—promising himself that he would see to it that she lay aside those maidenly affectations and settle down as a good wife. He came of a well-to-do family, from the Uruguayan province of La Florida where he was born in 1885. He was, at the time of their meeting, engaged in the business of horse-dealing, and must have been somewhat of a dandy, for at his death they found no less than eight hats and a handsome array of neckties that numbered forty-two.

Her marriage must have come as a surprise, for Reyes was apparently a new-comer—unknown even to her parents until shortly before she was to leave their home in search of that ideal, superhuman love that obsessed her:

*Imagina el amor que habré soñado*

.....

*Más grande que la vida, más que el sueño.*

*Imagina el amor, amor que quiere*

*Vida imposible, vida sobrehumana . . . (II, 78)<sup>1</sup>*

And she sought to find it in the arms of this man, to whom she could so aptly have applied the verses she wrote some time before:

*Venías a traerme mi destino,*

*Tal vez desde el Olimpo, en esas manos . . . (I, 77)*

She did not, however, leave her home with the lightness of heart which the anticipation of joy usually imparts to a young bride. She must, at the end, have had misgivings; for when the guests were gathered, and the ceremony was due to begin, she hesitated before signing the marriage-contract, and anxiously inquired of her friends and witnesses—the writers Manuel Ugarte and Juan Zorrilla de San Martín—whether she should go on with it or not. Ugarte<sup>2</sup> later described the incident thus:

Don Juan Zorrilla de San Martín y yo firmamos como testigos en la ceremonia, y aun creo estar viendo el gesto febril de Delmira Agustini, que nos preguntó en el momento decisivo:

—¿Qué hago? ¿Me caso?

La miramos asombrados, sin saber qué responder. Hubo un instante de des-

<sup>1</sup> In all quotations of Delmira Agustini the numbers which follow indicate the volume and page of the edition of her *Obras completas*, Montevideo, 1924.

<sup>2</sup> "El casamiento de Delmira Agustini", *loc. cit.*

concierto. Pero el padre se acercaba. Entonces mojó la pluma hasta el fondo, y en un relámpago, firmó, dejando a guisa de rúbrica un borrón que anunciaba la salpicadura de la sangre.

And Badet says more or less the same thing:

Elle hésite cependant et le jour de son mariage, quand elle est déjà parée de sa toilette d'épousée, que tous les invités et les témoins sont là, elle refuse de signer l'acte qui va la lier pour la vie . . . Scandale! Chacun la raisonne, insiste . . . et lassée, étourdie, elle signera cet acte qui la liera non pour la vie mais pour la mort . . .

Less than two months had passed, however, when she returned home; and finding comfort at her mother's side she cried that she had run away from vulgarity! The groom remained in the honeymoon chalet at Pocitos fifteen or twenty days longer, and then moved to the memorable house in Montevideo—number 1206, Andes Street.

In November of 1913, less than three months after the wedding—August 14th—she filed suit for separation, and not for divorce as has been erroneously stated. The claim she presented against her husband—which already foreshadows the impending tragedy—was as follows:

Hechos graves ocurridos muy poco tiempo después de nuestra unión me indujeron a refugiarme en casa de mis padres, donde me encuentro aún.

El convencimiento de la imposibilidad de toda reconciliación ante los agravios que he recibido, me impulsan (sic) a presentarme a V. S. requiriendo la mencionada separación.

Posteriormente a mi alejamiento de la casa del señor Reyes la conducta de éste para conmigo ha sido realmente condenable, pues ante la perspectiva de que pudiera revelar yo hechos gravemente injuriosos me ha dirigido amenazas sangrientas.

Reyes made his reply on November 27th, flatly denying the charges, and stating that because of the fact that his wife had first left his home and then had unjustly accused him of conduct "unbecoming a gentleman," he would comply with her wishes, for, under those circumstances, life under a common roof with her would be unbearable to him as well.

Yet he must have been greatly upset by the thought of a permanent disunion, and, according to Badet:

. . . il lui écrit lettre sur lettre, il sonne à sa porte, frappe à ses fenêtres, sanglote qu'il l'aime et passe chaque jour des supplications aux menaces envers la mère de Delmira que,—dans son égarement,—il rend responsable de l'éloignement de celle qu'il adore plus que jamais.

It is at this point that conjecture must again be the elucidator. Some claim that, incompatible in every spiritual way, yet apparently drawn together by that "amor sombrío" that filled her verses, they held secret trysts at a



house meant to be a haven for lovers. Others assert that Delmira, in the hope of eventually winning a promise of permanent separation from Reyes, visited him frequently at his rooms in Andes, 1206, pretending thus to perpetuate their intimacy; while her friend Badet says that it was but once that Delmira went to see Reyes, when after having been tormented by her husband for many weeks, she finally consented to a secret meeting before he left for the Argentine where he was to attempt to forget her.

One thing is certain: on July 6, 1914, the press was able to relate to avid readers—with all the gruesome details and accompanying photographs—the finding of the bodies of Delmira Agustini and Enrique Job Reyes, who finally found a way to retain by his side the woman he had loved so passionately.

There were witnesses—notably the landlady of the house in which Reyes lived—to confirm the fact that Delmira was a frequent visitor at Reyes' rooms, and more especially during the last month; and there were letters written by him, more than a month previously, to a friend and to his mother, which prove that Delmira Agustini's husband had contemplated suicide.

Whatever interpretation one might give to the tragedy—whether, as some think, Reyes, tormented by the thought of a possible rival, had killed her and then fired the shot which proved fatal to him; or whether the feeling of inferiority before his wife drove him to find equality in death—there is no doubt that to Enrique Job Reyes life must have been the "martirio horrible" of which he spoke in the letter to his mother. He loved Delmira with a deep human passion, while to her he probably had been but a stepping-stone in the search of that ideal love that hungered for the impossible, for the superhuman . . .

Her death will always be a mystery; and as Luisa Luisi<sup>1</sup> says, offering still another interpretation:

Nada sabemos de los móviles que impulsaron la tragedia de su muerte. No sabemos si ella le fué impuesta por la mano celosa del esposo, o consentida y aun provocada por la tremenda desilusión que empezaba ya a obscurecer con manto de negruras insondables el alma apasionada y torrencial de la poetisa.

Delmira Agustini seemed to find a certain voluptuous delight in evoking the image of death in connection with love. And if it is true that in 1911—in a letter addressed to Julieta de la Fuente, Julio Herrera y Reissig's wife<sup>2</sup>—she spoke of suicide, one could presume that she may have had a "death complex" which culminated in a tragedy that, as has been intimated, might have been prompted by the poetess herself.

<sup>1</sup> *A través de libros y de autores*, Buenos Aires, 1925, p. 183.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. Parra del Riego, *op. cit.*

Did Delmira have a premonition of her tragic end? Badet speaks of

. . . la mort qu'elle a toujours pressentie puisque dès l'adolescence elle a répété:  
"Je sens que ma vie finira dans une tragédie."

As in the case of María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira, it has been found necessary to state that up to the day of her marriage Delmira Agustini was *chaste*—obviously people could scarcely believe that the poems of one who sang:

*Piedad para las manos enguantadas  
De hielo, que no arrancan  
Los frutos deleitosos de la Carne* (I, 85)

were merely "the children of an idle brain" . . .

Among her friends she could count many of the outstanding figures of the Spanish American literary world. In Montevideo, among others, Samuel Blixen, editor of the review *Rojo y Blanco*, which was the first to publish the poems of Delmira; Herrera y Reissig,—perhaps the greatest poet of his country at that time—whose strange verses, undoubtedly, made a deep impression on her; Zorrilla de San Martín, the author of *Tabaré*, who was later to be a witness at her wedding. Those outside her own country included men like Manuel Ugarte (another witness at her wedding), Amado Nervo and Rubén Darío, who had occasion to admire and praise the poetess from afar. Of the latter, whose "Pórtico" appeared in her book *Los cálices vacíos*, she had a portrait with the inscription: "Ex toto corde et anima."

At twenty-eight, then, Delmira Agustini's life was spent—a life so full of promise and of fire; a life which because of its intensity, its glow and its brevity has been on many occasions likened to a meteor (Labarca); "un *astro llameante* que cruzara la noche," says Zum Felde; "un milagro *ígneo y floral*," adds Juana de Ibarbourou, who recognized in her "an older sister"; "surge"—says Julieta Carrera—"como un *relámpago* cortando la noche"; while Alfonsina Storni calls her life "una *llamarada ardiente* que se levantó como un *volcán*." Yet she was not to exist so ephemerally. She lives not only in her verses, which since their incipience had been adjudged "great," but something of her spirit—for better or for worse—has been transmitted to that ever-growing group of modern Spanish American poetesses who, under the subterfuge of *candor*, have since disarmed critics with their blatant hymns to the Flesh.





## II

### WORKS

Although it is said that Delmira Agustini wrote her first poem when she was seven, none of those extant, so far as we know, was written prior to the age of ten.

When, at sixteen, she decided that she would abandon all for writing, she must immediately have set about her purpose, for on the 27th of September of 1902 there appeared in *Rojo y Blanco*—according to Zum Felde, “el primer semanario cultural y gráfico de cierta categoría aparecido en el País”—her poem “¡Poesía!”. This marked her entrance into the literary world. Two months later—on November 30th—*La Alborada*, another illustrated weekly, very popular then, too, in Montevideo, and which contained poems, stories and articles by the foremost writers of the day (at home and abroad), and by some who were later to rise to eminence, published “Crepúsculo,” her first contribution.

Several other poems of hers were published in that same review before her formal “presentation” to the public in the issue of March 1, 1903, with the title: “Una poetisa precoz.” One of her most popular pictures—the one that shows her as a very young girl, with her hair down her back—illustrated the page. The somewhat elaborate and effusive introduction read as follows:

Presentamos hoy a los consecuentes adoradores de las nueve Musas, a la novel poetisa Delmira Agustini, que ha hecho sus primeras armas en versos deleitosos e inspirados, en nuestra revista.

Delmira Agustini, es una verdadera joya, un *bijou*: más que una niña, casi una señorita, se incorpora con decidida vocación al manojo de mujeres poetisas uruguayas, con todos los prestigios para hacerse valer de todos los encariñados de lo bello: una precoz inspiración surgida de lo hondo, del corazón sensible que ama y que llora, que ríe y desprecia con altiveces superiores,—y una belleza física de virgen rubia, delicada, sensible y joven como un pétalo de rosa.

Y por eso se concibe que su pluma nueva escriba vibraciones encantadoras, al calor de su lozana locuela de la casa y de su alma sensitiva, que la remontan en vuelo majestuoso hasta los paraísos del ideal y del ensueño.

Hay cepa en ella de poetisa y hay vigor de fuerzas para vibrar las cuerdas de la lira hasta romperlas, en un día no lejano. Hay más también; hay hechizos en ella para hacer cantar en un mismo concanto, el *hosanna* eterno de las nueve diosas, a los amadores de lo grande y de lo bello. Se dijera que toda ella es una armonía.

Esa fué nuestra impresión, cuando una buena mañana llegó a nuestra redacción a traernos un trabajo, que pulió con sus manecitas de muñeca en nuestra mesa revuelta, y que nos leyó después con una entonación delicada, suave, de cristal, como si temiera romper la madeja fina de su canto, desenvuelta en la rueca de un papel delicado y quebradizo como su cuerpecito rosado, como el encaje de sus versos.

In the period encompassed by the issues of November 30th, 1902, and January 1st, 1904, there appeared in *La Alborada* a total of sixteen poems

by Delmira Agustini. Thirteen of these were later published in her *Obras completas* in a section which bears the same title as the review. It was so called, probably, because most of her very early poems were first published there, and also because, symbolically, these poems represent "la alborada"—the dawn—of her great poetic day. Only one: "Misterio, ven," was included in *El libro blanco*; the remaining two, appropriately called "Atomos", for they are fragmentary thoughts rather than poems with a definite central idea, found no place in her opera omnia. One, published September 13, 1903, reads:

*El genio, la virtud, benditas llaves  
Que abren al hombre dos sagrados templos;  
Aquél el reino de la gloria humana,  
¡Esta el sagrario divinal del cielo!*

Mis anhelos

*Diluir mi ser en la sublime esencia  
Que anima y vivifica al universo,  
En una vibración verter la vida,  
Fundir el alma en el crisol de un verso!*

Mis aves

*El águila real, soberbia, indómita,  
Cuyas pupilas desdeñosas, duras,  
Son dos bocas de fuego que recitan  
La leyenda sin fin de las alturas!  
El ave Genio; en sus pupilas hondas,*

*Por una mano misteriosa escrito,  
Vibra grandioso sus estrofas ígneas  
El poema de luz del infinito!*

Las flores preferidas

*Los blancos crisantemos, los nostálgicos  
Que desmayan al peso del recuerdo;  
Lígeros vasos de marfil que brindan  
Eróticas visiones, raros sueños!*

The other, reproduced by H. de Córdova<sup>1</sup> in his study on the early part of Delmira Agustini's career, contains but eight lines:

*El dolor subcorpóreo, el dolor íntimo,  
El que ignora el lenguaje del sollozo,  
Cáncer interno que invisible roe:  
¡El que vibra en las almas, no en los ojos!*

*No sé si soy feliz, no sé si sufro;  
Deshojo risas y desgrano lágrimas;  
Llevo en el alma realidades negras,  
¡Llevo en la mente idealidades blancas!*

<sup>1</sup>"Crónica de hace 25 años. Páginas desconocidas de la biografía de Delmira," in *La Pluma*, Montevideo, 1928, VII.

Thirteen poems published in *La Alborada*—"Crepúsculo," "La fantasía," "Flor nocturna," "En el album de la señorita E. T.," "Artistas," "Claro oscuro," "Fantasmas," "Ave de luz," "Ojos-nidos," "Evocación," "La duda," "Monóstrofe," "Viene"—are said to have been composed between the ages of ten and fifteen.

The *Obras completas* gives five others of that period whose source is unknown to us. It is possible that some of the poems grouped under the title "La Alborada" may never before have appeared in print and were copied from originals found at her death, which her family submitted for publication. As one ("¡Poesía!") was published in *Rojo y Blanco*—a magazine which we have not been able to examine—we can assume that Delmira Agustini probably published others in that periodical. The same may be true of the eighteen poems said to have been composed between the ages of fifteen and eighteen—none of which appeared in *La Alborada* during the years 1902-1904. We saw one, "Astrólogos," in the issue of July 20, 1912 of *La Semana* of Montevideo, which probably published more of her poems. A more exhaustive examination of the collections of Montevidean reviews—inaccessible to us—would undoubtedly yield interesting information regarding Delmira Agustini's contributions to current periodicals.

In comparing poems that appeared in the magazines mentioned and in some of the books published during her lifetime, with those in the *Obras completas*, we find a great many variants—some of which make an attempt to improve on the original, while others appear to be sheer misprints. It is not possible to know who is responsible for the former. Did Mr. Salaverri, as editor, think himself empowered to "correct" words or phrasing, for the sake of rhythm or meaning? Or were some of these changes wrought by the well-meaning brother, of whom Mr. Salaverri speaks, who spends much of his time deciphering and "revising" manuscripts left by his sister? Perhaps Delmira herself was responsible for some of these revisions. It must undoubtedly have been so in cases where entire lines were changed.

Delmira Agustini's contributions to *La Alborada* were not limited to poems. On August 2, 1903, there appeared an announcement:

Desde el número próximo, la inteligente y aprovechada poetisa señorita Delmira Agustini, que nuestros lectores han podido conocer en el curso de mucho tiempo a esta parte en sus bellas producciones poéticas, se hace cargo en nuestra revista de una sección de sociales que hemos dejado a su voluntad intitular. En ella se ocupará de hacer las siluetas, que irán acompañadas del retrato, de nuestras niñas más interesantes en cultura y belleza, que bastante tiene nuestro suelo uruguayo de todo ese nuestro sexo bello tan alabado por las ponderaciones de los extranjeros que nos visitan, que le ha valido la magia de una reputación honrosa en los ambientes de otros pueblos y otras sociedades.

Esperamos que nuestras simpáticas lectoras aplaudirán sin vacilaciones nuestra



elección, y contribuirán en la medida de sus fuerzas a embellecer la sección que se inaugura bajo la delicada pluma y exquisita imaginación de nuestra interesante poetisa y compañera.

The following week, accordingly, she launched her column which she christened *La legión etérea*; and as if to justify her choice of title, she explained:

Etérea, sí, celeste, es la delicada legión de personitas deliciosas con cuyo desfile nos proponemos encantar a nuestros lectores; celeste también es esta página, himno triunfal a la hermosura femenina; celeste, porque está dedicada a la belleza, regio destello de la divinidad; celeste, porque está dedicada a la mujer, encarnación sublime de la belleza.

She adopted a pseudonym—*Joujou*—in keeping with the style and the title of her portraits, and an adequate rhyme for *bijou*, a word used, as we have seen, as descriptive of her, by the author of her presentation; and by the poetess herself in praise of María Gurméndez. In these silhouettes—excessively florid and ornate for the modern taste, and surcharged with words and concepts of the most extravagant modernist stamp—Delmira Agustini gave vent to her winged imagination which also soared to vaporous, celestial heights. And as Córdova so aptly puts it: "Cada silueta de Joujou era un poema de divina cursilería" . . .

Yet these portraits—a not too-distant cry, perhaps, from the saccharine word-silhouettes that were then so popular—have a certain gift of expression and a poetic force which make them different; and like her poems of that period, they also disclose a lyric source of great potentiality, although dominated, as yet, by the masterful modernist currents.

It is true she repeats, too often, words, concepts and modes of expression which she deems felicitous. The diminutives (*cuerpecito, cabecita, personita, manecitas, piecitos, reinita, vocesita; diablillo, avecillas; coquetuelas*) abound; the French words (*bijou, bibelots, élite, chic*) do not enhance the colorfulness of a phrase. There run, throughout, the strains of what the Modernists would have called a symphony in white, as ivory, mother-of-pearl, alabaster, snow, lilies, are repeatedly evoked in praise of body, hands, feet: "frente de alabastro," "cuerpecito de marfil," "nacarado cuerpo," "rostro níveo"; "un semblante de palideces nacáreas, de suavidades liliales"; "cuello níveo como una azucena de marfil"; "manos blancas . . . como dos mariposas de marfil"; pies ". . . como dos pajaritos de nieve"; "pie . . . como mariposa de nieve . . ." She is, perhaps, too fond of words like *vago, diáfano, transparente, aéreo, vaporoso, leve, delicado, suave, etéreo*—all of which transmit the qualities of vagueness, levity, airiness, transparency, which, like visions and dreams, absorb so many of her thoughts; too fond, also, of the heavenly attributes: *olímpico, celeste, angélico* . . .

The use of repetition, for emphasis, is undoubtedly overdone in certain instances and rendered monotonous by the lack of variety of expression:

"unas manecitas blancas, muy blancas"; "dos océanos hondos, muy hondos"; "vibraciones finas, muy finas"; "dos flores grandes, muy grandes, negras, muy negras"; "como dos almas tristes, muy tristes"; "es suave, vaporosamente suave, es blanca, luminosamente blanca." It proves more effective, however, in the repetition of the adjective: "ojos . . . llenos de fuego, llenos de sombra, llenos de abismo, llenos de cielo"; "toda delicadeza, toda simpatía, toda diafanidad, toda luz" . . . or of the adverb: "fantásticamente suave, fantásticamente bello"; "maravillosamente lindas, maravillosamente huecas." Yet, in spite of the weak points which we may attribute, in many cases, to external influences, *La legión etérea* has passages of great beauty.

\*

There are four distinct phases in the evolution of Delmira Agustini's poetry. The first covered the period of her childhood and adolescence, from her tenth to her eighteenth year (1896-1904). These poems, most of which had been published in current periodicals, were excluded practically in their totality from her books. The second is that comprised by her two books, *El libro blanco* (1907) and *Cantos de la mañana* (1910). This phase is characterized by a simplicity of thought, a delicacy of expression, and a relatively wide range of themes. These books are still "within the norms"—esthetically and morally. In 1913, however, with *Los cálices vacíos*, Delmira Agustini was to enter a phase which was no longer to abide by the established canons. This book, formed by a selection of poems from *El libro blanco*—for she was already beginning to feel the need of healthful pruning—by *Cantos de la mañana* and the new *Cálices*, accentuates the erotic theme, expressed with marked audacity. This, and the strangeness of her poetry which seems to have begun to lose touch with reality, gave rise to remarks, like Suárez Calimano's, to the effect that this book marks "la floración de una poesía de caso clínico." The wealth of imagery, and the ease—and force—with which she breaks into the freest of poetic expression, are typical of what Delmira Agustini could produce under her own mantle of originality. The fourth and last phase—cut short by her untimely death—is undoubtedly the most obscure, the most baroque, the most tortuous, but also the most original.

All these stages of her work may be studied in the two-volume edition of her complete works which was published in 1924, and which paves the convenient, and accessible—if not always the exact—road to Delmira Agustini's poetic production.

"La Alborada," the section of the *Obras completas* which contains her earliest compositions, is divided into two parts. The first consists of poems written between her tenth and fifteenth year; the second, of those composed between the ages of fifteen and eighteen. According to Oribe, none of the poems of this early period should have been included in this

collection as they do not add any value to the total estimate of her work and, moreover, because the poetess herself had excluded them from all the editions that had appeared under her own vigilance and direction. Had Delmira been alive, and had she consented to their publication in these, her complete volumes, she might have added an "advertisement" similar to the one written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her *Complete Poetical Works*:

Several poems I would willingly have withdrawn . . . The alternative is a request to the generous reader that he may use the weakness of those earlier verses . . . less as a reproach to the writer than as a means of marking some progress in her other attempts.

The editor does say of these "poemitas de infancia": "La familia de la autora los exhuma a simple título de curiosidad, para los que quieran saber cómo se formó la poetisa."

These early efforts of Delmira Agustini which had been published in local reviews such as *La Alborada* and *Rojo y Blanco*, are inspired by the conventional themes of first poems, such as Nature, and the usual "aves" or "hails" to Hope, Genius, Poetry, Lost Illusions, Fantasy, etc. In them she already reveals her predilection for twilight—that sad, indefinable and mysterious hour which prepares one for the advent of night, and the consequent "ensueños" and "visiones" which even then were to clothe her thoughts and color her moods. It is interesting to note that in the thirty-seven poems written between the ages of ten and eighteen not once does love form the central theme—love which is later to become more or less the monochord that sounds throughout her entire work. Although puerile in their conception, and abounding in outworn clichés, some of these poems already contain the seeds of true poetry which were later to germinate in *El libro blanco*, *Cantos de la mañana*, etc.

Her first book, *El libro blanco* (1907), contained all the characteristic elements of her poetry in a form more limpid than she was to achieve later when there is a growing tendency towards the baroque. Her favorite themes are already there: the germinating and flowering of a great, powerful race ("La estatua," "La siembra"), mystery ("Misterio, ven"), height ("Racha de cumbres"), her muse ("La musa," "Mi musa triste"), dreams ("Nardos"), and the ever-recurring one of love, which finds expression in "Intima" (*Yo te diré los sueños de mi vida/en lo más hondo de la noche azul . . .*), "Explosión" (*Si la vida es amor, bendita sea!/Quiero más vida para amar!*), "Amor" (*Yo lo soñé impetuoso, formidable y ardiente*), "El intruso" (*Amor, la noche estaba trágica y sollozante/cuando tu llave de oro cantó en mi cerradura*), "La copa de amor" (*Bebamos juntos en la copa egregia*) and the unforgettable "Desde lejos" (II, 83):



*En el silencio siento pasar hora tras hora,  
Como un cortejo lento, acompasado y frío . . .  
¡Ah! Cuando tú estás lejos mi vida toda llora  
Y al rumor de tus pasos hasta en sueños sonrío.*

*Yo sé que volverás, que brillará otra aurora  
En mi horizonte grave como un ceño sombrío;  
Revivirá en mis bosques tu gran risa sonora  
Que los cruzaba alegre como el cristal de un río.*

*Un día, al encontrarnos tristes en el camino,  
Yo puse entre tus manos pálidas mi destino!  
¡Y nada de más grande jamás han de ofrecerte!*

*Mi alma es frente a tu alma como el mar frente al cielo:  
Pasarán entre ellas tal la sombra de un vuelo,  
La Tormenta y el Tiempo y la Vida y la Muerte!*

It was of this book, published when she was about twenty years of age, that Carlos Vaz Ferreira,<sup>1</sup> brother of the poetess María Eugenia, and one of the outstanding personalities of Uruguay, said:

Si hubiera de apreciar con criterio relativo, teniendo en cuenta su edad, etc. calificaría su libro sencillamente como un milagro. Ud. no debería ser capaz, no precisamente de escribir, sino de entender su libro. Como ha llegado Ud. sea a saber, sea a sentir lo que ha puesto en ciertas páginas suyas, es algo completamente inexplicable.

*Cantos de la mañana* (1910), profiting by three years of added maturity, accentuates the notes introduced in her earlier book, and adds volume to her intensity of thought and expression. In it are included poems that speak of sadness ("La barca milagrosa": *la cargaré de toda mi tristeza*; "De Elegías dulces" . . . : *tan triste que he llorado hasta quedar inerte*); of morbid dreams (" . . . . .": *La intensa realidad de un sueño lúgubre/puso en mis manos tu cabeza muerta*; "Tú dormías": *Engastada en mis manos fulguraba/ como extraña presea tu cabeza*); of passion ("El nudo": *Y se besaban hondo hasta morderse el alma*); of tenderness ("Los relicarios dulces": *Alma que yo ondulaba tal una cabellera/derramada en mis manos*) and "Lo inefable" (II, 21), considered one of her best, which speaks of the tragedy of barren thought:

*Yo muero extrañamente . . . No me mata la Vida,  
No me mata la Muerte, no me mata el Amor;  
Muero de un pensamiento mudo como una herida . . .  
¿No habéis sentido nunca el extraño dolor*

*De un pensamiento inmenso que se arraiga en la vida.  
Devorando alma y carne, y no alcanza a dar flor?  
¿Nunca llevasteis dentro una estrella dormida  
Que os abrasaba enteros y no daba un fulgor? . . .*

<sup>1</sup> "Juicio crítico," in: Delmira Agustini, *Los cálices vacíos*, Montevideo, 1913.

*Cumbre de los Martirios! . . . Llevar eternamente,  
Desgarradora y árida, la trágica simiente  
Clavada en las entrañas como un diente feroz! . . .*

*Pero arrancarla un día en una flor que abriera  
Milagrosa, inviolable! . . . Ah, más grande no fuera  
Tener entre las manos la cabeza de Dios!*

Reprinting a selection of *El libro blanco*, all of *Cantos de la mañana*, and completing the volume with some new verses which are a paeon to Eros—to whom the book is “offered”—Delmira Agustini once more came before the public eye in 1913, with the publication of *Los cálices vacíos*. The ardency and nakedness with which Delmira expressed her innermost yearnings—physical and spiritual—must have scandalized middle-class society in Montevideo, which, it is said, shrank from her as from a “fleur du mal.”<sup>1</sup>

She who spoke of the physical aspect of love as of something torn out of her book of memories, with the plasticity and intensity which such memories evoked in her, was hailed by writers everywhere as a new Sappho. And she who sang:

*Te inclinabas a mí como si fuera  
Mi cuerpo la inicial de tu destino  
En la página oscura de mi lecho (I, 63)*

or in her desire to guide Eros, “Padre ciego”:

*Da a las dos sierpes de su abrazo, crueles,  
Mi gran tallo febril . . . Absintio, mieles,  
Viérteme de sus venas, de su boca . . .  
¡Así tendida soy un surco ardiente,  
Donde puede nutrirse la simiente  
De otra estirpe sublimemente loca! (I, 67)*

or, speaking of the lover’s hands, said:

*Con finos dedos tomasteis  
La ardiente flor de mi cuerpo . . . (I, 76)*

or related the intensity of their passion:

*En sólo un beso nos hicimos viejos . . . (I, 88)*

must have seemed another Leda, whose desires transcended the human, in “El cisne”:

<sup>1</sup> “La desnudez erótica de *Los cálices vacíos* produjo el efecto de una escandalosa transgresión a las normas del pudor femenino . . . Las señoras de la burguesía hicieron en torno a la poetisa un vacío prudente.” (A. Zum Felde, *Proceso intelectual del Uruguay*, Montevideo, 1930, vol. II, p. 232.)—“La espontaneidad salvaje y el fuego sensual de sus producciones estableció en seguida en torno de ella una especie de cordón sanitario. Las almas apocadas y prudentes se alejaron como de un foco de perdición.” (M. Ugarte, *op. cit.*)

*Sus alas blancas me turban  
 Como dos cálidos brazos;  
 Ningunos labios ardieron  
 Como su pico en mis manos;  
 Ninguna testa ha caído  
 Tan lánguida en mi regazo;  
 Ninguna carne tan viva,  
 He padecido o gozado . . .  
 . . . . .  
 Agua le doy en mis manos  
 Y él parece beber fuego;  
 Y yo parezco ofrecerle  
 Todo el vaso de mi cuerpo . . . (I, 82)*

At the end of the new poems she appended the following note, which announced another book that she had already titled but that she was never to see in print:

"Actualmente preparó *Los astros del abismo*.

Al incluir en el presente volumen—segunda edición de *Cantos de la mañana* y de parte de *El libro blanco*—estas poesías nuevas, no he perjudicado en nada la integridad de mi libro futuro. El deberá ser la cúpula de mi obra.

Y me seduce el declarar que si mis anteriores libros han sido sinceros y poco meditados, estos *Cálices vacíos*, surgidos en un bello momento hiperestético, constituyen el más sincero, el menos meditado . . . y el más querido."

This note was not reproduced in the *Obras completas*, nor the poem in French which follows:

*Debout sur mon orgueil je veux montrer au soir  
 L'envers de mon manteau endeuillé de tes charmes.  
 Son mouchoir infini, son mouchoir noir et noir,  
 Trait à trait, doucement, boira toutes mes larmes.<sup>1</sup>  
 Il donne des lys blancs à mes roses de flamme  
 Et des bandeaux de calme à mon front délirant . . .  
 Que le soir sera bon! . . . Il aura pour moi l'âme  
 Claire et le corps profond d'un magnifique amant.*

The posthumous poems which number but seventeen have appeared only as part of her complete works. If there had been moments in her earlier work when one felt that the elusive significance of the poem had been entirely subordinated to a semi-delirious expression of ardent hopes of mind and body, then surely one would feel, reading these palpitating verses of the last period, that one was face to face with a naked soul that vibrated with a passion bordering on the pathological. Enriched by superb imagery and an erotic imagination, prodigious in its intensity, these poems reach heights that reveal her as a woman, mature with passion, who conceived them, undoubtedly, in those hours of artistic "delirium" of which she speaks in *La legión etérea*. They evince, at times, a morbid imagina-

<sup>1</sup> The same image—that of the black handkerchief of night drinking in her tears—was to appear later in Spanish as "la noche bebe el llanto como un pañuelo negro" (I, 25).



tion that verges on the paranoic. They are, however, as she herself had prophesized, the pinnacle of her work. Typical of this last period are the poems "Mis amores" and "Boca a boca."

The *Obras completas* published in Montevideo in 1924—ten years after her death—consists of two volumes. Both of these bear titles which Delmira Agustini herself fashioned, but which she was never to use in her lifetime: *El rosario de Eros* and *Los astros del abismo*. The latter, as we have seen, was that of a future book, already announced by her in *Los cálices vacíos*; the former, that under which she grouped that section of *Los astros del abismo* that she had already completed at the time of her death.

The order which the editor used in these volumes is the reverse of that of the composition of the poems; and so volume I, *El rosario de Eros*, begins with the posthumous poems and continues with *Los cálices vacíos* and part of *Cantos de la mañana*, while volume II completes the latter and also contains *El libro blanco* and her earlier poems, grouped in two parts, as we have said before, under the common title of *La alborada*. The editor appears to be Vicente A. Salaverri, who is the author of the unsigned article "Rumbo" which is used as the prologue to volume I, and also of the one, "Ante el cadáver de la poetisa," which he signs and which appears at the end of the same volume, with the date of composition: July 17, 1914.<sup>1</sup>

In an attempt to explain some of her strange compositions, it has been said that she wrote in a sort of trance, and that it was under the influence of what Zum Felde calls "lyric ecstasy" that most of her poems were written.<sup>2</sup> Sensitive to the slightest sound or disturbance, Delmira Agustini found the late hours of the night, and those of early dawn, more satisfying for uninterrupted thought; more conducive, perhaps, to her peculiar type of inspiration. That is probably why so many of her poems are peopled with uncanny visions, typical of those evoked in the semi-dormant, semi-vigilant stage in which so many of them took form.

<sup>1</sup> For the benefit of readers who may wish to consult this collection, we give below the works in chronological order, together with the corresponding volume and pages of the *Obras completas*:

*La alborada* (first part) — Volume II, pp. 93-126.

*La alborada* (second part) — Volume II, pp. 129-156.

*El libro blanco* — Volume II, pp. 41-90.

*Cantos de la mañana* — Volume I, pp. 91-100; vol. II, pp. 17-38.

*Los cálices vacíos* — Volume I, pp. 51-88.

*El rosario de Eros* — Volume I, pp. 21-48.

<sup>2</sup> Suárez Calimano speaks of the "teatralismo" with which she liked to surround herself when she wrote.

### III

#### THEMES

Life, Death, Love—these are the cardinal themes of all poetry, for they are the thoughts that burn deepest into man's mind. But each poet has a thematic scale of his own, conditioned and determined by his personality. The study of a poet's main themes, therefore, is essential to the understanding, the interpretation, and the evaluation of his work as a whole; his particular manner of expressing them is what lends originality to his style.

Delmira Agustini's treatment of these three "vital" themes of Life, Death and Love is, in our opinion, highly original—indicative of an unusual conception and perception of the enigmas of life and death, and an absorbing and deep understanding of what to her is the life-giving passion of love. She rarely isolates in her poems one of these themes from the other two, for, with a marked gift for synthesis, which is apparent in all her work, she takes all threads and weaves them into an intricate pattern which, in almost every instance, blends several of the themes that form the framework of her poems. Thus, she invariably associates life with death ("De todos esos vasos donde bebí la *vida*,/de todos esos vasos donde la *muerte* bebo . . ." I, 26); love with life ("Si la *vida* es *amor*, bendita sea!/Quiero más *vida para amar*!" II, 80); love with death ("Los lechos negros logran la más fuerte/rosa de *amor*; arraigan en la *muerte*" I, 22). Often the three themes are fused ("Tu *amor*, esclavo, es como un sol muy fuerte:/jardinero de oro de la *vida*,/jardinero de fuego de la *muerte*" I, 28).

These primary themes—Life, Death, Love—and all the others that she elaborates, are not always seen in the bright light of reality. Most often they are clothed in the mantle of the unreal—dreams, visions ("magníficas visiones"), aspirations, which to this poetess are more poignant than reality itself. The fantasmagoric, the oneiric, then, constitutes a fourth important and complex element in the poetry of Delmira Agustini.

Dreams enter her every phase of thought and emotion. They encompass her ideal of love:

*Imagina el amor que habré soñado . . .*  
.....  
*Más grande que la vida, más que el sueño . . .* (II, 78)

They alone can smooth the rough edges of life, for they hold in their cavernous depths the balm for life's wounds:

*Las cavernas del sueño: decid, flores,*  
*¿No serán . . . el oasis . . . de la vida?* (II, 56)

They evoke the image of death:

*La intensa realidad de un sueño lúgubre  
Puso en mis manos tu cabeza muerta* (II, 18)

Life, Death, Love, Dreams . . . The following two lines illustrate the admirable and apparently effortless blending of the four main themes which lend voice to her poetry. She is speaking of the *lover's* mouth:

*Copa de vida donde quiero y sueño  
Beber la muerte con fruición sombría* (I, 42)

### LOVE

*O rosario fecundo,  
Collar vivo que encierra  
La garganta del mundo . . .*

Love is the most persistent theme in the poetry of Delmira Agustini. Like a *leitmotiv* it runs through her entire work. More than half of her poems deal wholly with that emotion which, as Byron's Julia said, is "woman's whole existence." And in one form or another—a thought, an expression, a figure of speech—it permeates almost every one of the rest.

But love to Delmira Agustini was not merely her whole existence. Love to her was life, yes—and life was love. But her ideal of love transcended that. It scaled the mystic wall that divides life from death, and time could allot no span to its infinity:

*Mi alma es frente a tu alma como el mar frente al cielo:  
Pasarán frente a ellas tal la sombra de un vuelo  
La Tormenta y el Tiempo y la Vida y la Muerte!* (II, 83)

From her earliest poems one can sense the tremendousness of her ideal. She yearned for a love greater than life itself; a love which soared to heights to which dreams could not venture—a love which even she, in her idealism, regarded as "impossible," as *superhuman*:

*Imagina el amor que habré soñado  
En la tumba glacial de mi silencio!  
Más grande que la vida, más que el sueño . . .  
.....  
Imagina mi amor, amor que quiere  
Vida imposible, vida sobrehumana* (II, 78)

*El libro blanco* defines in poems, strangely profound for one so young, her concept of that emotion which was to rule her life—and death. It might be called the *first phase* in that experience which was to bring such tragic consequences. Borrowing the vocabulary then in vogue, we might call it, variously, the "white" phase (for love, then, was pure), or the "blue"



phase (for love, then, wore a halo of azure dreams), or the "rose" phase (for love, then, was colored with optimism).

In "Intima" she is filled with illusions and dreams of what love is, and may be, to her. She finds great happiness in her desire to share her dreams—her richest treasure—with the lover; in the comfort of letting him "bear her cross":

*Yo te diré los sueños de mi vida  
En lo más hondo de la noche azul . . .  
Mi alma desnuda temblará en tus manos  
Sobre tus hombros pesará mi cruz (II, 77)*

She is confident that he alone can quench her thirst for that superhuman love ("más grande que la vida, más que el sueño"):

*Muero de ensueños; beberé en tus fuentes  
Puras y frescas la verdad; yo sé  
Que está en el fondo magno de tu pecho  
El manantial que vencerá mi sed (II, 77)*

In "Explosión" she is in a joyous mood ("Mi vida toda canta, besa, ríe"). She has found love, and life is beautiful. If life is love, she hungrily wants more of it so that she may continue to love:

*Si la vida es amor, bendita sea!  
Quiero más vida para amar! (II, 80)*

Love is still a new experience. She finds the need to define it in its complexity, and so she writes the poem aptly called "Amor" (II, 81):

*Yo lo soñé impetuoso, formidable y ardiente;  
Hablaban el impreciso lenguaje del torrente;  
Era un mar desbordado de locura y de fuego,  
Rodando por la vida como un eterno riego.*

*Luego soñélo triste, como un gran sol poniente  
Que dobla ante la noche la cabeza de fuego;  
Después rió, y en su boca tan tierna como un ruego,  
Sonaba sus cristales el alma de la fuente.*

*Y hoy sueño que es vibrante, y suave, y riente, y triste,  
Que todas las tinieblas y todo el iris viste;  
Que, frágil como un ídolo y eterno como Dios,*

*Sobre la vida toda su majestad levanta;  
Y el beso cae ardiendo a perfumar su planta  
En una flor de fuego deshojada por dos...*

She is grateful for the love that, with a golden key, entered her life to dispel the tragic night of melancholy that enveloped her:

*Amor, la noche estaba trágica y sollozante  
Cuando tu llave de oro cantó en mi cerradura . . . (II, 82)*

And so she feels the need to reflect the lover's every mood:

*Y hoy río si tú ríes, y canto si tú cantas;  
Y si tú duermes, duermo como un perro a tus plantas!* (II, 82)

When he is not beside her, her entire life weeps in sorrow; and his presence brings a smile to her lips, even in dreams:

*¡Ah! Cuando tú estás lejos mi vida toda llora  
Y al rumor de tus pasos hasta en sueños sonrío* (II, 83)

It is first-love and she feels the immensity of it. She puts her fate in the lover's hands. No gift of love could be greater!:

*Un día, al encontrarnos tristes en el camino,  
Yo puse entre tus manos pálidas mi destino!  
¡Y nada de más grande jamás han de ofrecerte!* (II, 83)

In *Cantos de la mañana*, written three years later, the poems of love, although sounding deeper and more somber depths, are still, essentially, of the *first phase*. She speaks grimly of the indissoluble union of their souls—even the Fates are powerless before it. Although the flesh, weak at best, may give way, they are bound fast by an unyielding, "intricate" knot:

*Y el Destino interpuso sus dos manos heladas . . .  
¡Ah! los cuerpos cedieron, mas las almas trenzadas  
Son el más intrincado nudo que nunca fué . . .  
En lucha con sus locos enredos sobrehumanos  
Las Furias de la vida se rompieron las manos  
Y fatigó sus dedos supremos Ananké . . .* (II, 29)

Her love has now something of the morbid in it. Strangely enough, it is the lover's *head*—either in dreams or in reality—that evokes thoughts that might have been premonitions:

*La intensa realidad de un sueño lúgubre  
Puso en mis manos tu cabeza muerta;  
Yo la apresaba como hambriento buitre . . .* (II, 18)  
*Engastada en mis manos fulguraba  
Como extraña presea, tu cabeza;  
.....  
¡Ah! tu cabeza me asustó . . . Fluía  
De ella una ignota vida . . . Parecía  
No sé qué mundo anónimo y nocturno . . .* (II, 31)

A veil of sadness seems to cloud all past joy; sadness that only tears—bitter, disconsolate tears—can allay:

*Tan triste que he llorado hasta quedar inerte . . .* (I, 93)  
*Pobres lágrimas mías las que glisan  
A la esponja sombría del Misterio* (I, 94)  
*Y así la lloro hasta agotar mi vida . . .* (II, 18)

Her heart seems to have suffered a cruel blow:

*Pobre mi corazón que se desangra  
Como clepsidra trágica en silencio (I, 94)*

Melancholy has again spread its wings; once more she finds herself

*Arrojada en el manto  
Pálido y torrencial de mi melancolía (II, 28)*

There must have been a parting—a severance of bonds once thought holy:

*Hoy desde el gran camino, bajo el sol claro y fuerte,  
Muda como una lágrima he mirado hacia atrás,  
Y tu voz, de muy lejos, con un olor a muerte,  
Vino a aullarme al oído un triste "Nunca más!" (I, 93)*

Several poems are written in a tone of sweet and wistful reminiscence:

*Su idilio fué una larga sonrisa a cuatro labios . . .*

*En los palacios fúlgidos de las tardes en calma  
Hablabanse un lenguaje sentido como un lloro,  
Y se besaban hondo hasta morderse el alma! . . .  
Las horas dehojáronse como flores de oro (II, 29)*

*Hace tiempo, algún alma ya borrada fué mía . . .  
Se nutrió de mi sombra . . . siempre que yo quería  
El abanico de oro de su risa se abría,*

*O su llanto sangraba una corriente más;*

*Alma que yo ondulaba tal una cabellera  
Derramada en mis manos . . . (II, 34)*

But she warns that one must not talk of the past. It is a chapter closed irrevocably:

*Los pasados se cierran como los ataúdes (I, 93)*

*Los cálices vacíos* unfolds a new panorama. She is now entering the second, or "red" phase. The dedication—to Eros—sets the tone for the entire book.

Love appears to have been seasoned with experience ("en sólo un beso nos hicimos viejos"). The lover has visibly descended from the ethereal plane of the ideal to be invested with a more tangible and palpable reality. His carnal presence is ardently felt:

*Por tus manos indolentes  
Mi cabello se desfloca;  
Sufro vértigos ardientes  
Por las dos tazas de moka*



*De tus pupilas calientes;  
 Me vuelvo peor que loca  
 Por la crema de tus dientes  
 En las fresas de tu boca;  
 En llamas me despedazo  
 Por engarzarme en tu abrazo . . . (I, 66)*

Entire poems are dedicated to his mouth ("Tu boca"), his eyes ("En tus ojos"), his hands ("Para tus manos"). And the physical aspect of the union is repeatedly evoked:

*Te inclinabas a mí como si fuera  
 Mi cuerpo la inicial de tu destino  
 En la página oscura de mi lecho (I, 63)*

*Eros, yo quiero guiarte, Padre ciego . . .  
 Pido a tus manos todopoderosas,  
 Su cuerpo excelso derramado en fuego  
 Sobre mi cuerpo desmayado en rosas!*

*La eléctrica corola que hoy despliego  
 Brinda el nectario de un jardín de Esposas;  
 Para sus buitres en mi carne entrego  
 Todo un enjambre de palomas rosas!*

*Da a las dos sierpes de su abrazo, crueles  
 Mi gran tallo febril . . . (I, 67)*

*Caigamos en un ramo de rosas y de lirios! (I, 53)*

But of all the poems of this much-discussed book "Plegaria" and "El cisne" are undoubtedly the most vehement; "El cisne," especially a daring revelation of sexual passion at its height—conceived in the image of a swan! ("Pero en su carne me habla/y yo en mi carne le entiendo"). The intensity with which the entire poem is written is sustained to the end as she depicts the protagonists of this, the strangest of dramas:

*El cisne asusta de rojo,  
 Y yo de blanca doy miedo! (I, 83)*

This is but one example of the extent to which Delmira Agustini felt free to express even the most turbulent and dubious emotions. The same may be said of "Plegaria" in which she voices a prayer—to Eros—for those who, clad in the "complete steel" of their chastity, are impervious to his tempestuous darts:

*Piedad para los ínclitos espíritus  
 Tallados en diamante,  
 Altos, claros, extáticos  
 Pararrayos de cúpulas morales . . . (I, 85)*

And yet, the spiritual is not totally absent from *Los cálices vacíos* which, compared with *El libro blanco*, might properly be called *The Red*

*Book* of Delmira. For her love—even in the wildest sea of passion—always seeks a spiritual hold:

*Piedad para las manos enguantadas  
De hielo, que no arrancan  
Los frutos deleitosos de la Carne  
Ni las flores fantásticas del alma . . . (I, 85)*

Perhaps the carnal road was but another futile attempt in her unending search for the one who was to hold for her "la esencia de una sobrehumana pasión":

*De las espumas armoniosas surja  
Vivo, supremo, misterioso, eterno,  
El amante ideal, el esculpido  
En prodigios de almas y de cuerpos;  
Debe ser vivo a fuerza de soñado,  
Que sangre y alma se me va en los sueños;  
Ha de nacer a deslumbrar la Vida,  
Y ha de ser un dios nuevo! (I, 71)*

The final theme of the erotic symphony of Delmira Agustini is the most complex, the most erratic of all. The rosary of love ("El rosario de Eros," I, 21) gives us in its successive "beads" every conceivable phase of love, from the most pure to the most ardent and somber. And Delmira, in her insatiable thirst, begs Eros to grant them all to her:

Marble beads:

*Amor de blanco y frío,  
Amor de estatuas, lirios, astros, dioses . . .  
¡Tú me lo des, Dios mío!*

Beads of shadow:

*Gloria al amor sombrío  
Como la Muerte pudre y ennoblece . . .  
¡Tú me lo des, Dios mío!*

Beads of fire:

*Amor rojo, amor mío,  
Sangre de mundos y rubor de cielos . . .  
¡Tú me lo des, Dios mío!*

Beads of light:

*Amor de luz, un río  
Que es el camino de cristal del Bien  
Tú me lo des, Dios mío!*

But there is a cynical, bitter note in that last—"False beads"—in which she asks that, in return for all these loves, she always be permitted to give *one*: the cold love of deceit:

*Amor de burla y frío  
Mármol que el tedio barnizó de fuego  
O lirio que el rubor vistió de rosa,  
Siempre lo dé, Dios mío . . .*

In "Mis amores" (I, 25) she speaks of the many loves—"Fueron tantos, son tantos!"—that haunt her. Their heads torment her:

*Todas esas cabezas me duelen como llagas . . .  
Me duelen como muertos . . .*

Their eyes, still more, for they come in pairs:

*Ab! . . . y los ojos . . . los ojos me duelen más: son dobles! . . .  
Indefinidos, verdes, grises, azules, negros.*

Their mouths inflict her with a thirst that only they themselves can quench:

*Ellos me dieron sed de todas esas bocas  
.....  
Vasos rojos o pálidos de miel o de amargura . . .*

And their hands—some of them born with "gloves of caress" ("guantes de caricia")—torture her too:

*Y las manos, las manos colmadas de destinos  
Secretos y alhajadas de anillos de misterio . . .*

For now she no longer wants them all. Among those heads, hands, eyes, she only seeks those of one:

*¡Ah, entre todas las manos yo he buscado tus manos!  
Tu boca entre las bocas, tu cuerpo entre los cuerpos,  
De todas las cabezas yo quiero tu cabeza,  
De todos esos ojos, ¡tus ojos solos quiero!*

And they are those of him whom she apparently once left: "Me dirás si lloraste cuando te dejé solo."

Deep sadness ("me derrumbó en tu abrazo profundo la tristeza") and melancholy ("el veneno divino de la melancolía"), ever present in these last poems, gradually pave the way to disillusionment which is nowhere more patent than at the end of "Diario espiritual" (I, 31). In this poem she follows the impetuous odyssey of her soul which, first a limpid lake ("Es un lago mi alma"), became a fountain ("Mi alma es una fuente"), then a stream ("Un arroyo es mi alma"), a torrent ("Mi alma es un torrente"), and, finally, an entire sea where love raged incessantly ("Mi alma es todo un mar . . . en que el amor divaga sin cesar") to



end in a mire of weeping and of earth which pain and evil wrought—a muddy marsh that scarcely remembers that it was once crystal clear.<sup>1</sup>

And more than once the note of death is sounded, as in hope. She has morbid visions:

. . . *las abiertas*  
*Cortinas dicen cabelleras muertas* (I, 22)

. . . *en la corriente*  
*Vi pasar un cadáver de fuego . . .* (I, 29)

and speaks, reverently, of “los lechos negros”—those “grandes lechos tendidos de tristeza” which are rooted in death.

Love, as Delmira knew, is “all there is of Heaven—and all there is of Hell”: “Puente de luz, perfume y melodía,/comunicando infierno y paraíso” (I, 51); “Raíz nutrida en la entraña del Cielo y del Averno” (I, 100). Love is all the good and all the bad (“Amor es todo el Bien y todo el Mal,” I, 100). And so the pleasure that it brings is always seasoned with pain (“A Eros”: “Porque tu cuerpo es la raíz, el lazo/esencial de los troncos discordantes/del placer y el dolor, plantas gigantes,” I, 51). To Delmira Agustini, therefore, the lover’s mouth, hands, eyes, inflict a rapturous torment, a bitter sweetness that makes love more poignant: “El placer unges de dolor; tu beso/puñal de fuego en vaina de embeleso” (I, 42); “Pico de cuervo con olor de rosas,/agujón enmelado de delicias/tu lengua es. Tus manos misteriosas/son garras enguantadas de caricias/tus ojos son mis medianoche crueles,/panales negros de malditas mieles” (I, 28). All manifestations of love are artfully clothed in pleasure: the kiss is a *dagger* of fire encased in rapture (“puñal de fuego en vaina de embeleso”); the hands, *claws* gloved with caresses (“garras enguantadas de caricias”); the tongue, a *bee-sting* honeyed with delight (“agujón enmelado de delicias”). And there is a certain voluptuousness in recalling or anticipating the painful pleasure inflicted by biting, or by the daggers and claws in kiss or hands: “Morder tu carne rubia; joh, fruto de los soles!”; “Yo que abriera/tu herida mordí en ella . . ./como en el oro de un panal mordiera”; “tu beso/me come en sueños como un cáncer rosa”; “En sus manos asombren caricias y puñales”; “Manos en que se siente un puñal nunca visto.” One feels that she delights in this joyous mental

<sup>1</sup> A similar image was used by Espronceda in “Canto a Teresa”:

. . . ¡Oh! ¿quién impío  
¡Ay! agostó la flor de tu pureza?  
Tú fuiste un tiempo cristalino río,  
Manantial de purísima limpieza;  
Después torrente de color sombrío,  
Rompiendo entre peñascos y maleza,  
Y estanque, en fin, de aguas corrompidas,  
Entre fétido fango detenidas.

rending of the flesh, this blissful suffering—in the “dulce daño” for which Alfonsina Storni pined.

Love is life (“Jardinero de oro de la vida”) and it is death (“Jardinero de fuego de la muerte”). And the same mouths hold in their depths the two intoxicating nectars: “De todos esos vasos donde bebí la vida/de todos esos vasos donde la muerte bebo.” At times she thirsts for life: “Si la vida es amor, bendita sea!/Quiero más vida para amar!”; but at others she feels the need of the somber rapture of death: “Copa de vida donde quiero y sueño/beber la Muerte con fruición sombría.”

Love is the spirit—and it is the flesh. And although at times there may be a preponderance of one (“a veces ¡toda! soy alma”) or of the other (“y a veces ¡toda! soy cuerpo,”) in most instances soul and body, the spiritual and physical aspects of love, are closely associated in the poems of Delmira Agustini, and often appear, simultaneously, in a single thought:

*Ven a mí: mente a mente;  
Ven a mí: ¡cuerpo a cuerpo!* (I, 27)

*Maduro de pasión, en carnes y almas* (I, 22)

*Si así sueño mi carne, así es mi mente* (I, 36)

*Los ojos son la Carne y son el Alma* (I, 98)

*En prodigios de almas y de cuerpos* (I, 71)

*Luego será mi carne en la vuestra perdida . . .  
Luego será mi alma en la vuestra diluida . . .* (I, 21)

*Que me lograste rosas en la nieve del alma,  
Que me lograste llamas en el mármol del cuerpo* (I, 56)

*Mi espíritu se dobla como un gajo de lilas,  
Y mi cuerpo te envuelve . . . tan sutil como un velo* (I, 59)

*Déjame bajo el cielo de tu alma  
En la cálida tierra de tu cuerpo!* (I, 72)

*Piedad para las manos enguantadas  
De hielo, que no arrancan  
Los frutos deleitosos de la Carne  
Ni las flores fantásticas del alma* (I, 85)

She was the first of the Spanish American poetesses to speak freely of the carnal aspect of love. So free, indeed, was her expression of what many hoped were merely *dreams* of love and desire, that in some of her poems she was thought to have far outstepped the bounds of decency. Her “Plegaria” (I, 84) which begins:

—Eros: ¿acaso no sentiste nunca  
Piedad de las estatuas?

is a paeon to the flesh—a plea against chastity:

*Piedad para las vidas  
Que no doran a fuego tus bonanzas  
Ni riegan o desgajan tus tormentas;  
Piedad para los cuerpos revestidos  
Del armiño solemne de la Calma,  
Y las frentes en luz que sobrellevan  
Grandes lirios marmóreos de pureza,  
Pesados y glaciales como témpanos;  
Piedad para las manos enguantadas  
De hielo, que no arrancan  
Los frutos deleitosos de la Carne  
Ni las flores fantásticas del alma;  
Piedad para los ojos que aletean  
Espirituales párpados:  
Escamas de misterio,  
Negros telones de visiones rosas . . .  
¡Nunca ven nada por mirar tan lejos!  
Piedad para las pulcras cabelleras  
—Místicas aureolas—  
Peinadas como lagos  
Que nunca airea el abanico negro,  
Negro y enorme de la tempestad;  
Piedad para los ínclitos espíritus  
Tallados en diamante,  
Altos, claros, extáticos  
Pararroyos de cúpulas morales;  
Piedad para los labios como engarces  
Celestes donde fulge  
Invisible la perla de la Hostia;  
—Labios que nunca fueron,  
Que no apresaron nunca  
Un vampiro de fuego  
Con más sed y más hambre que un abismo.—  
Piedad para los sexos sacrosantos  
Que acoraza de una  
Hoja de viña astral la Castidad . . .*

“El cisne” (I, 81) is one of the most frankly erotic poems ever written:

*El ave cándida y grave  
Tiene un maléfico encanto;  
—Clavel vestido de lirio,  
Trasciende a llama y milagro! . . .  
Sus alas blancas me turban  
Como dos cálidos brazos;  
Ningunos labios ardieron*

*Como su pico en mis manos;  
Ninguna testa ha caído  
Tan lánguida en mi regazo;  
Ninguna carne tan viva,  
He padecido o gozado:  
Viborean en sus venas  
Filtros dos veces humanos!*



*Del rubí de la lujuria  
Su testa está coronada;  
Y va arrastrando el deseo  
En una cauda rosada . . .*

*Agua le doy en mis manos  
Y él parece beber fuego;  
Y yo parezco ofrecerle  
Todo el vaso de mi cuerpo . . .*

*Y vive tanto en mis sueños,  
Y abunda tanto en mi carne,  
Que a veces pienso si el cisne  
Con sus dos alas fugaces,  
Sus raros ojos humanos  
Y el rojo pico quemante,  
Es sólo un cisne en mi lago  
O es en mi vida un amante . . .  
.....  
Hunde el pico en mi regazo  
Y se queda como muerto . . .*

And yet at times, as we said, the spirit seems to be in the ascendant. Love, then, is a union of twin souls—souls so identical that one is like the mirror of the other:

*Y sé que en nuestras almas se produjo  
El milagro inefable del reflejo;  
En el silencio de la noche mi alma  
Llega a la tuya como a un gran espejo (II, 78)*

She puts her soul, her spirit, her very destiny into her lover's hands—simply—as though she were giving more tangible gifts of love ("Mi alma desnuda temblará en tus manos"; "En tus manos mi espíritu es dúctil como un rizo"; "Yo puse entre tus manos pálidas mi destino . . ."). Perhaps because with those very hands he had lifted her from the depths of sadness:

*Ellas me alzaron como un libro roto  
De mi tristeza como de un pantano . . . (I, 77)*

and carried her away from the tower of melancholy:

*¡Oh, Tú que me arrancaste a la torre más fuerte! (I, 56)*

Still, she speaks of the soul as she would of the body. She caresses it, as though it were a lock of the lover's hair: "Alma que yo ondulaba tal una cabellera/derramada en mis manos . . ." Her soul falls into the lover's arms ("como cayó en tus brazos mi alma herida") and lies tremblingly in his hands ("mi alma desnuda temblará en tus manos"). And she offers it to him as she would her body:

*Así en las sombras de la vida ahora  
Yo te abro el alma como un cielo azul! (II, 84)*

As love is the spirit and it is the flesh, so is it chastity, and passion and lust. And she who at times is a burning furrow, whose glance is a serpent of desire gliding to the whiteness of the lover's body, whose ardor scorns the heavy and icy lilies of purity ("grandes lirios marmóreos de pureza,/pesados y glaciales como témpanos" I, 85), at others puts out, one by one, the roses of passion, and, on a divan of calm, abandons her-

self to the quiet of chastity ("Para el amor divino ten un diván de calma/ o con el lirio místico que es su arma, mi alma/apagará una a una las rosas de tu lecho!" I, 34).

Love which is good and which is bad, which is life and which is death, which is sweet and which is bitter, which is purity and which is lust, is *miraculous, invincible, eternal* ("Amor es milagroso, invencible y terno"). It is *infinite* and *boundless*—its wings aspire to span the sky: "el Cielo/ todo es la arcada ardiente de sus alas cernidas." And because it is all these things, love transfigures and transforms. Before love entered her life she lived in the somber tower of melancholy ("yo vivía en la torre inclinada/de mi Melancolía")—the damp tower that harbored the spiders of ennui ("las arañas del tedio") and the toadstools of loneliness ("los hongos de soledad"), springing up in the corners of night, humid with silence ("brotando en los rincones de la noche/húmedos de silencio"). And the large spiders of vigilance and insomnia ("las grandes arañas del desvelo") and those of tedium ("las arañas del tedio, las . . . más grises") spun and spun their webs incessantly, in silence and in drabness ("en silencio y en gris, tejían y tejían . . .").

But one day there came a "pilgrim" who was to free her from this prison of shadows and silence and solitude. And it was he who turned her tears into a limpid lake radiant with swans ("hiciste todo un lago con cisnes de mi lloro"). His hands mercifully lifted her from the depths of her sadness, deftly stopped-up the veins of her weeping and tenderly smoothed her wings to heal them of earth's stinging wounds:

*Ellas me alzaron como un lirio roto  
De mi tristeza como de un pantano;  
Me desvelaron de melancolías  
Obturaron las venas de mi llanto,  
Las corolas de oro de mis lámparas  
De insomnio deshojaron . . .  
.....  
Mis alas embriagadas de pereza  
Con dulzura balsámica peñaron,  
Les curaron las llagas de la tierra . . . (I, 77)*

She who had felt lonely and cold now finds joy in life and warmth in the cloth of fire in which his hands enveloped her. Her hands, which he warmed in his, will never again grow cold ("mis manos, que tus manos abrigaron, ya nunca/se enfriarán") for the chill of loneliness has been dispelled.

And because love brings comfort and joy and warmth—her entire life bursts into flower ("mi vida toda es una boca en flor!"). Her heart, crushed by melancholy and slowly dying, now blossoms into radiant bloom ("mi corazón moría triste y lento . . ./hoy abre en luz como una flor febea"). And she blesses the night—the sobbing and dark night—that

"flowered" in her life the lover's mouth ("y bendigo la noche sollozante y oscura/ que floreció en mi vida tu boca tempranera!").

"Love in flower" is a persistent idea in the poetry of Delmira Agustini, and so roses, lilies, carnations—and each of their component parts (buds, petals, calyx, corolla . . .)—are constantly being used in countless and effective analogies, as is the mere state or function of flowering.

When in the presence of the lover, she feels herself "unfolding" ("¡Ah, yo me siento abrir como una rosa!"); for his moist, warm glance, like summer rain, causes her flesh to open up in roses: "Su mirada . . . abre en rosas mi carne con un cálido riego." And she promises sweet favors in the shadow of night:

*Vamos más lejos en la noche, vamos  
Donde ni un eco repercute en mí,  
Como una flor nocturna allá en la sombra  
Yo abriré dulcemente para tí (I, 79)*

The repeated use of the verb *abrir* makes the analogy obvious. Yet it is worth noting that as she herself "unfolds" to the lover, so did she offer her heart:

*Yo ofrendé . . . mi corazón que abría  
Como una flor de sangre, de amor y de armonía (II, 74)*

and now her soul:

*Así en las sombras de la vida ahora,  
Yo te abro el alma . . . (II, 84)*

And that before his picture (in an admirable blending of the abstract and the concrete) she "loosens hair and soul" for him, and bursts into flower:

*. . . yo desato  
Cabellos y alma para tu retrato,  
Y me abro en flor! . . . (I, 65)*

Sweetly overpowered by the strength of her love she swoons in the soft petals of surrender ("como en pétalos flojos yo desmayo a tu hechizo"), and asks that the lover's body, afire with passion, find hers—abandoned to the roses of voluptuousness:

*Su cuerpo excelso derramado en fuego  
Sobre mi cuerpo desmayado en rosas! (I, 67)*

The ardent flower of her body ("la ardiente flor de mi cuerpo") was plucked by him whose own is made of petals of pleasure and delight ("su cuerpo hecho de pétalos de placer y de encanto"); by him whose hands are filled with the flowers of fondness ("sus manos colmadas de rosas de cariño"); by him whose eyes are buds of two undreamed-of nights



("capullos de dos noches imprevistas"), or two seeds of light among the shadows—which cause everything they fall upon to blossom:

... *Tus ojos me parecen*  
*Dos semillas de luz entre la sombra,*  
*Y hay en mi alma un gran florecimiento*  
*Si en mí los fijas; si los bajas, siento*  
*Como si fuera a florecer la alfombra!* (II, 17)

The lover's mouth runs the gamut of flowery loveliness: "*clavel sonoro*", "*cáliz en donde el corazón flamea*", "*una rosa fresca sobre los ríos/del Fuego y la Armonía*", "*dos pétalos de rosa abrochando un abismo*"; while the kiss, similarly, is: "*una flor de fuego deshojada por dos*", "... *flor de cuatro pétalos . . . dos de ciencia/y dos iluminados de inocencia . . . el cáliz una sima embriagante y sombría.*" Hers had once been: "*flor sombría de un otoño muy largo . . .*"

Specific flowers have their special significance. The carnation is always synonymous with passion. She herself is: "*la brasa candente de un gran clavel de pasión*"; the lover's mouth, as we have seen, "*clavel sonoro*"; while the deceiving swan, clothed in desire: "*clavel vestido de lirio.*" The rose, frequently coupled with the lily, for contrast, is most often suggestive of sexual love:

*O con el lirio místico que es su arma, mi alma*  
*Apagará una a una las rosas de tu lecho!* (I, 34)

*Caigamos en un ramo de rosas y de lirios!* (I, 53)

*O lirio que el rubor vistió de rosa . . .* (I, 24)

*¡Ah, yo me siento abrir como una rosa!* (II, 85)

*Su mirada . . .*  
*. . . abre en rosas mi carne . . .* (I, 47)

*Tu sombra logra rosas de fuego en el hogar* (I, 41)

*Que me lograste rosas en la nieve del alma* (I, 56)

*Y vuelvo toda en rosas . . .*  
*Arropada en su fuego* (II, 24)

*Su cuerpo excelso derramado en fuego*  
*Sobre mi cuerpo desmayado en rosas!* (I, 67)

The lily always stands for purity ("grandes lirios marmóreos de pureza") and innocence, meekness and submissiveness ("soy caída y erguida como un lirio a tus plantas").

Thus, love is the spring-like flowering of one's whole being. But

it is also a raging sea of fire and madness ("un mar desbordado de locura y de fuego")—an avid flame fed by the huge black fan of tempest ("el abanico negro, negro y enorme de la tempestad") which the omniscient Eros wields. And this fire—which eats and consumes—burns in the lover's body ("su cuerpo excelso derramado en *fuego*") and in his glance ("su mirada me viste de terciopelo y *fuego*"), his mouth ("surco de *fuego*") and kiss ("flor de *fuego*"; "puñal de *fuego*"). To Delmira Agustini, then, passion, as always, is *fire*. And, as usual, the epithets descriptive of it are suggestive of *warmth* ("la *ardiente* flor de mi cuerpo"; "rojo pico *quemante*"; "*calientes* pupilas") and *redness* ("el cisne asusta de *rojo*"; "rojo pico"). Carnations, rubies, blood . . . are frequently used to convey the latter attribute of passion and lust:

[*Swan*] Clavel vestido de lirio (I, 81)

Yo soy la brasa candente  
De un gran clavel de pasión (I, 92)

Del rubí de la lujuria  
Su testa está coronada (I, 82)

Manos que vais enjoyadas  
Del rubí de mi deseo (I, 76)

[*Kiss*] Y uno rojo, ardiente  
Que es rubí y que es fuego! (II, 144)

Amor rojo, amor mío;  
Sangre de mundos y rubor de cielos . . . (I, 23)

Chastity, on the other hand, is white and cold. Pure love in the "Rosario de Eros" is called "amor de *blanco y frío*." And she speaks, in awe, of the *icy*, marble *lilies* of purity:

Grandes lirios marmóreos de pureza  
Pesados y glaciales como témpanos (I, 85)

That is why, perhaps, she uses the verb *nevar* (to snow)—transitively—in a double sense: to imply whiteness and cold, as she asks the lover to "snow down" to her the deep fleurs-de-lis of his soul: "*Nevad* a mí los lises hondos de vuestra alma" (I, 21). We recall how the hands of those who had not plucked the fruits of the flesh were gloved in ice, and that loneliness and pride are cold and sunless towers of isolation, from which one watches the slow and chilling cortège of vanished hours go by.

Chastity is associated with light—passion and lust with shadows and with darkness. And as purity is white, so is it fulgent (like the soul), while passion is dark and somber (like the flesh):

*Mi beso es flor sombría de un Otoño muy largo . . . (I, 98)*

*Es tu abrazo magnífico y oscuro . . . (I, 28)*

She speaks of the *heaven* of his soul, and the *earth* of his body. The soul, then, is ethereal, spiritual, resplendent, cool; the body, earthly, carnal, somber, warm. The soul is white and calm; the body red and ardent.

Desire is grimly depicted as "un vampiro de fuego/con más sed y más hambre que un abismo." And other vampires—and vultures—are evoked, as if to appease that abysmal thirst and hunger:

*. . . Yo que abriera  
Tu herida mordí en ella . . .*

.....

*¿Por qué fui tu vampiro de amargura? . . .  
¿Soy flor o estirpe de una especie oscura  
Que come llagas y que bebe llanto? (I, 96)*

*Vengo como el vampiro de una noche aterida  
A embriagarme en tu sangre nueva . . . (I, 98)*

*La intensa realidad de un sueño lúgubre  
Puso en mis manos tu cabeza muerta;  
Yo la apesaba como hambriento buitre . . . (II, 18)*

*[Mouth] Pico rojo del buitre del deseo . . . (I, 43)*

Serpents and snakes symbolize the undulating waves of desire, in body, look, embrace, love itself:

*En mis sueños de amor, ¡yo soy serpiente!  
Gliso y ondulo como una corriente (I, 36)*

*Y era mi mirada una culebra  
Apuntada entre zarzas de pestañas,  
Al cisne reverente de tu cuerpo.  
Y era mi deseo una culebra  
Glisando entre los riscos de la sombra  
A la estatua de lirios de tu cuerpo! (I, 63)*

*Da a las dos sierpes de su abrazo, crueles  
Mi gran tallo febril . . . (I, 67)*

*[Love] . . . rosario imantado de serpientes (I, 24)*

The beaks of animals (swans, ravens, vultures, eagles) figure largely in Delmira Agustini's erotic symbolism. These beaks are aflame and red with passion; they are avid—and burning with desire:

*Alma del lago es un cisne  
.....*

*Alas lirio, remos rosa,  
Pico en fuego . . .  
.....*



*Ningunos labios ardieron  
Como su pico en mis manos;*  
.....

*Agua le doy en mis manos  
Y él parece beber fuego*  
.....

*Sus raros ojos humanos  
Y el rojo pico quemante*  
.....

*Y el silencio es una rosa  
Sobre su pico de fuego . . . (I, 81-83)*

*Los cuervos negros sufren hambre de carne rosa;  
En engañosa luna mi escultura reflejo,  
Ellos rompen sus picos, martillando el espejo . . . (I, 24)*

*El olor de tu sangre,  
El color de tu sangre  
Flamean en los picos ávidos de mis águilas (II, 24)*

Her lover's mouth, by analogy, is: "*pico rojo del buitre del deseo*" (I, 43); his tongue: "*pico de cuervo con olor de rosas.*"

The fire—that burning desire—which is love, produces an insatiable thirst. The mouth, therefore,—and frequently the entire body—is a vessel (a vase, a glass, a cup) in which the lover seeks to quench it:

*Ellos me dieron sed de todas esas bocas*  
.....

*Vasos rojos o pálidos, de miel o de amargura (I, 26)*

*La taza rosa de tu boca en besos (I, 71)*

*Sin que abra en flor como una copa cárdena  
Tu dolorosa boca de sediento! (I, 94)*

*Copa de vida donde quiero y sueño  
Beber la muerte con fruición sombría . . . (I, 42)*

*Agua le doy en mis manos  
Y él parece beber fuego;  
Y yo parezco ofrecerle  
Todo el vaso de mi cuerpo (I, 82)*

*Ven a beber mis mieles soberanas:  
Yo soy la copa del amor pomposa (II, 85)*

*Te inclinabas a mi supremamente  
Como a la copa de cristal de un lago  
Sobre el mantel de fuego del desierto (I, 62)*

*Soy un pomo de abismo (I, 36)*

The lips sometimes refresh when one is suffering from that parching thirst: "*Bebieron en mi copa tus labios de frescura*" . . . But what one drinks

therein, rather than allay that "sed maldita", must, inversely, aggravate it, for it is most often nectar or honey:

*La eléctrica corola que hoy desplego  
Brinda el nectario de un jardín de Esposas* (I, 67)

*Ven a beber mis mieles soberanas:  
Yo soy la copa del amor pomposa* (II, 85)

*. . . en el clavel sonoro  
De su boca, miel suavísima . . .* (II, 66)

And so the body and the mouth, receptacles of such sweetness, are frequently spoken of as honey-combs: [Bodies] "*Panales* de mi entraña"; [Mouth] "*Panal* de besos"; "Deja llegar mis labios a tus *panales* de oro." The tongue, comparable to the sting of the bee, is honeyed with delight or ecstasy: "Aguijón *enmelado* de delicias/tu lengua es." And the eyes perhaps because they open up like mouths ("abiertos como bocas en clamor"), are two deep vessels ("dos vasos profundos"), two black honey-combs filled with cursed honey: "*panales* negros de malditas mieles."

And the craving—that gnawing desire—which is love, is like an unappeasable hunger. The verbs *to bite* ("*morder* tu carne rubia") and *to eat* ("*me come* en sueños como un cáncer rosa") are those most adequately used to depict that feast of love for which she hungers: "Fiera de amor *yo sufro hambre* de corazones . . . / No hay manjar que más tienta, no hay más grato sabor"; "La intensa realidad de un sueño lúgubre / puso en mis manos tu cabeza muerta / yo la apresaba como *hambriento* buitre" . . .

All poets in evoking the image of the loved-one—whether real or imaginary—mention with more insistence, more detail, or more emotion those features or characteristics to which they are more susceptible. One need not read far in Delmira Agustini to discover her predilection for the *head* and *hands*, although the eyes,—especially—the mouth, and the lover's entire body incessantly enter the erotic frame of her poems.

The hands—perhaps because they are as alive as two souls ("tan vivas como dos almas"); perhaps because the arms of which they are a continuation are almost always associated in her mind with wings ("con los brazos abiertos tal dos alas . . ."; "yo abrí los brazos al tender las alas"; "abrir brazos . . . así todo ser es alado"); perhaps because they themselves are two tranquil wings ("tus manos son dos alas tranquilas")—are frequently invested with powers which transcend the sensory. And so the lover's, instead of bestowing more sensual caresses, hold in them her soul ("mi alma desnuda temblará en tus manos"), her spirit ("en tus manos mi espíritu es dúctil como un rizo"), and her destiny ("yo puse entre tus manos pálidas mi destino" . . .). They bind her spiritual wounds and arrest the wild current of her weeping. They enfold her in a cloth of fire when she is chilled by the ice of loneliness. And they are brimful

and fragrant with the roses of fondness ("colmadas de rosas de cariño") and the flower of desire ("colmadas de la flor del deseo"). They are jewelled with the ruby of her lust ("manos que vais enojadas / del rubí de mi deseo"), the pearl of her sadness ("la perla de mi tristeza"), and the diamond of her kiss ("y el diamante de mi beso"), and are resplendent with rings of mystery ("alhajadas de anillos de misterio").

The lover's hands, then, are nearly always associated with the abstract; for although she speaks of caresses, and the "flower of desire" which crowns them, one most often thinks of them as she once described them: taut from stretching out to destiny, and pallid from burying dead illusions ("tus manos alargadas de tenderse al Destino / todo palidecidas de amortajar quimeras"). And they seem only to touch her from afar ("parecían tocarme de muy lejos") . . .

From the inexhaustible wealth of caresses poets usually elect to describe those that inspire in them more tenderness—or passion. Delmira Agustini is partial to the smoothing and fondling of hair, and to the touch of soft, soothing hands on forehead or temples. And that is why in so many of her poems she pictures herself holding the lover's head—and even God's!—in her hands ("la intensa realidad de un sueño lúgubre / puso en mis manos tu cabeza muerta"; "engastada en mis manos fulguraba / como extraña presea tu cabeza"; "¡Ah, más grande no fuera / tener entre las manos la cabeza de Dios!"). The spirit and the soul, like hair, are tenderly fondled:

*Alma que yo ondulaba tal una cabellera  
Derramada en mis manos . . . (II, 34)*

*En tus manos mi espíritu es dúctil como un rizo . . . (I, 98)*

Yet, like countless other poets, she feels inevitably drawn to the eyes, for they are, as she says, both the flesh and the soul: "los ojos son la Carne y son el Alma." They can be countless things, for they reflect the myriad moods and nuances through which the body and the soul must pass: "son caricias, dolor, constelación, infierno." They are *abysmal* ("dos ojos de abismo"; "dos vasos profundos"; "eléctricos cerrojos de profundas estancias"), *mysterious* ("el gran misterio de sus ojos"), *enigmatic* ("en el agua cambiante de tus ojos de enigma"), *hypnotic* ("dos píldoras de insomnio y de hipnotismo"), *grave* ("dos manantiales graves"), *sad* ("tan dolientes/que un corazón partido en dos trozos ardientes/parecieron . . ."; "¡Ah, tus ojos tristísimos como dos galerías abiertas al poniente"; "sus ojos . . . se abren cansados y húmedos y tristes / como llagas de luz que se quejaron"), *cruel* ("tus ojos son mis medianoches crueles"). Yet she can imbibe calm from the depths of their pupils ("bebo en ellas la calma") for they are deep, and silent and good and tranquil ("por hondas, por calladas, por buenas, por tranquilas"). The eyes are liquid and moist ("dos manantiales graves y venenosos . . ."; "en tus ojos



. . . se concentraba / la vida como un filtro de tristeza / en dos vasos profundos . . ."; "en las aguas cambiantes de tus ojos . . .") but they are also fiery ("un corazón partido en dos trozos ardientes"; "hacía arder mis pupilas como dos incensarios"; "dos trozos de lumbre"). They are black ("tus ojos son mis medianoches crueles, / panales negros de malditas mieles"; "dos diamantes negros") but like a shaft of light, the pupils shine from their depths ("dos semillas de luz entre las sombras", "dos llagas de luz"). Their softness envelops her, and the fire that burns within them clothes her in its brilliant folds ("tu mirada me viste de terciopelo y fuego"). The moisture that they hold sprays her flowering flesh ("tu mirada . . . abre en rosas mi carne con un cálido riego") and the light that flows from them is benign like a dark, humid path that binds the aching wounds of the road ("tu mirada fué buena como una senda oscura / como una senda húmeda que vendara el camino"). She recognizes her footprints in the somber paths that burn under the lover's eyes ("Y en las sendas sombrías / de tus ojeras donde reconocí mis rastros")—paths that are deep and that she paved unknowingly ("las ojeras que ahondamos la tarde y yo inconscientes").

There are several poems devoted entirely to the eyes: "Fué al pasar", "Inextinguibles", "Tus ojos, esclavos moros" and "En tus ojos". The latter graphically describes the countless things—"palpitating, inanimate, clear, tenebrous, sweet, horrible, near or distant"—that the lover's eyes can be:

*Ojos a toda luz y a toda sombra!  
Heliotropos del Sueño! Plenos ojos  
Que encandiló el Milagro y que no asombra  
Jamás la vida . . . Eléctricos cerrojos  
De profundas estancias; claros broches,  
Broches oscuros, húmedos, temblantes,  
Para un collar de días y de noches . . .  
Bocas de abismo en labios centelleantes;*

*Natas de amargas mares nunca vistas;  
Claros medallas; tétricos blasones;  
Capullos de dos noches imprevistas  
Y madreperlas de constelaciones . . .*

*.....  
Maravilladas veladoras mías  
Que en fuego bordan visionariamente  
La trama de mis noches y mis días! . . .  
Lagos que son también una corriente . . .*

*.....  
Fondos marinos, cristalinas grutas  
Donde se encastilló la Maravilla;  
Faros que apuntan misteriosas rutas . . .  
Caminos temblorosos de una orilla*

*Desconocida . . . (I, 57)*

The lover's mouth, that "cup of life," that "marvelous nest of vertigo," is second only to the eyes in emotional appeal. Delmira, as we have said, sees the mouth as a flower, or as a cup, or glass, or as a honeycomb—all of which contain nectar or honey. But at times, when she feels damned, and the kiss is a somber flower engendered in a long and endless autumn, it contains only aloes and she stains and makes bitter the lips of those who touch her. The mouth is red ("boca de rubí y de llama"; "pico rojo"; "joya de sangre y luna"; "fruta bermeja"; "clavel sonoro") and ardent ("surco de fuego"; "cáliz en donde el corazón flamea"; "en sus labios/puede recoger el fuego de toda la vida") and it is as tender as a plea ("su boca tan tierna como un ruego"). But it is much more than that, as she tells us in the poem called "Boca a boca" (I, 42):

*Copa de vida donde quiero y sueño  
Beber la muerte con fruición sombría,  
Surco de fuego donde logra Ensueño  
Fuertes semillas de melancolía.*

*Boca que besas a distancia y llamas  
En silencio, pastilla de locura,  
Color de sed y húmeda de llamas . . .  
¡Verja de abismos es tu dentadura!*

*Sexo de un alma triste de gloriosa,  
El placer unges de dolor; tu beso,  
Puñal de fuego en vaina de embeleso,  
Me come en sueños como un cáncer rosa . . .*

*Joya de sangre y luna, vaso pleno  
De rosas de silencio y de armonía,  
Nectario de su miel y su veneno,  
Vampiro vuelto mariposa al día.*

*Tijera ardiente de glaciales lirios,  
Panal de besos, ánfora viviente  
Donde brindan delicias y delirios  
Fresas de aurora en vino de Poniente . . .*

*Estuche de encendidos terciopelos  
En que su voz es fúlgida presea,  
Alas del verbo amenazando vuelos,  
Cáliz en donde el corazón flamea.*

*Pico rojo del buitre del deseo  
Que hubiste sangre y alma entre mi boca,  
De tu largo y sonante picoteo  
Brotó una llaga como flor de roca.*

*Inaccesible . . . Si otra vez mi vida  
Cruzas, dando a la tierra removida  
Siembra de oro tu verbo fecundo,  
Tú curarás la misteriosa herida:  
Lirio de muerte, cóndor de vida,  
¡Flor de tu beso que perfuma al mundo!*

But the joy derived from head, hands, eyes, mouth, is partial as compared with that which the lover's body brings—his body, a "divan of delight", which hides under a concealing robe of chaste ermine its royal mantle of purple passion ("su cuerpo . . . que reviste un armiño / de castidad sobre una púrpura de pasión"). And to lure that "hypnotic jewel of alabaster," that "reverent swan," that "statue of lilies" which is his body she sometimes invites him to drink of the honey that she, the "cup of love," proffers:

*Ven a beber mis mieles soberanas:  
Yo soy la copa del amor pomposa* (II, 85)

And sometimes she leads him to the soft, silent shadows of night where she promises to unfold, like a nocturnal flower:

*Vamos más lejos en la noche, vamos  
Donde ni un eco repercute en mí  
Como una flor nocturna allá en la sombra  
Yo abriré dulcemente para ti.* (II, 79)

But, at others, it is to Eros that she appeals, as she asks his all-powerful hands to bring her the lover's body—clothed in fire:

*Eros, yo quiero guiarte, Padre ciego . . .  
Pido a tus manos todopoderosas,  
Su cuerpo excelso derramado en fuego  
Sobre mi cuerpo desmayado en rosas!* (I, 67)

For she longs to find herself "neath the heaven of his soul, in the warm earth of his body":

*Déjame bajo el cielo de tu alma  
En la cálida tierra de tu cuerpo!* (I, 72)

so that flesh lost in flesh, soul dissolved in soul, they may together scale the pinnacle of love:

*Luego será mi carne en la vuestra perdida . . .  
Luego será mi alma en la vuestra diluida . . .  
Luego será la gloria . . . y seremos un dios!* (I, 21)

Yet Delmira Agustini who speaks so directly, so frankly, of the flesh and of the body is *not* sensual. The caress—the kiss, the embrace, the touch—is more an emotion in her than a sensation; it finds echo and response in her mental rather than in her physical self. She does not dwell on the intimate details that women, especially, delight in. And yet her descriptions of love, and its expression, are often beautiful and tender:

*Su idilio fué una larga sonrisa a cuatro labios . . .  
.....  
Hablábanse un lenguaje sentido como un lloro . . .* (II, 29)

*¡Ah! Cuando tú estás lejos mi vida toda llora  
Y al rumor de tus pasos hasta en sueños sonrío* (II, 83)



## LIFE

*Decidme, flores, ¿qué sabéis del misterio de la vida?*

Life—or the vital force—is to Delmira incessant movement, energy, speed . . . She sees it as a wild stampede of young, savage colts flashing by, their manes extended, with the speed of fierce winds:

*Pasó humeante el tropel de los potros salvajes!  
Ferozes los hocicos, hirsutos los pelajes,  
Las crines extendidas, bravías, tal bordones,  
Pasaron como pasan los fieros aquilones! (II, 42)*

as the "Olympian beast": "Ver la olímpica bestia que elabora la vida", or as a violent sea: "La vida brota como un mar violento" . . .

Her conception of life is closely related to that of love—so much so that she identifies one with the other. And so she says:

*Si la vida es amor, bendita sea!  
Quiero más vida para amar! (II, 80)*

For love lifts its majesty above all life ("sobre la vida toda su majestad levanta") and life pulsates with the intensity of a wild sea where there is love. When love comes to her, she blesses God, the sun, the flower, the air, and all of life—for love *is* life:

*Bendije a Dios, al sol, la flor, el aire,  
La vida toda porque tú eras vida! (II, 78)*

In the poem called "¡Vida!" (II, 23) she tells how life (no fond lover could do more) satisfies all her needs. Like a fresh, limpid fountain it quenches her thirst and extinguishes her fire:

*A ti vengo en mis horas de sed como a una fuente  
Límpida, fresca, mansa, colosal . . .  
Y las punzantes sierpes de fuego mueren siempre  
En la corriente blanda y poderosa . . .*

Like a shady glade it gives her comforting rest in velvety softness:

*Vengo a ti en mi cansancio, como al umbroso bosque  
En cuyos terciopelos profundos la Fatiga  
Se aduerme dulcemente, con música de brisas,  
De pájaros y aguas . . .  
Y del umbroso bosque salgo siempre radiante  
Y despierta como un amanecer.*

Like a soothing balm it heals all wounds:

*Vengo a ti en mis heridas, como al vaso de bálsamos  
En que el Dolor se embriaga hasta morir de olvido . . .  
Y llevo  
Selladas mis heridas como las bocas muertas,  
Y por tus buenas manos vendadas de delicias.*

Life enfolds her in its fire when she is in need of warmth:

*Cuando el frío me ciñe doloroso sudario  
Lívida vengo a ti,  
Como al rincón dorado del hogar,  
Como al Hogar universal del Sol! . . .  
Y vuelvo toda en rosas como una primavera,  
Arropada en tu fuego.*

To life she goes in her arrogance that it may lift her to the very summit of her whims and her caprices:

*A ti vengo en mi orgullo,  
Como a la torre dúctil  
Como a la torre única  
Que me izará sobre las cosas todas!  
Sobre la cumbre misma,  
Arriscada y creciente,  
De mi eterno Capricho!*

And life is the only prey that her hungry being yearns for:

*Para mi vida hambrienta,  
Eres la presa única,  
Eres la presa eterna!  
El olor de tu sangre,  
El color de tu sangre  
Flamean en los picos ávidos de mis águilas.*

She goes to it in her countless and infinite desires, for life offers all—the constellations and the worlds:

*Vengo a ti en mi deseo  
Como en mil devorantes abismos, toda abierta  
El alma incontenible . . .  
Y me lo ofreces todo! . . .  
Los mares misteriosos florecidos en mundos,  
Los cielos misteriosos florecidos en astros,  
Los astros y los mundos!  
. . . Y las constelaciones de espíritus suspensas  
Entre mundos y astros . . .  
. . . Y los sueños que viven más allá de los astros,  
Más acá de los mundos . . .*

Therefore, how can she leave this sweet, this sheltering and munificent heart that is life—if life holds all for her?:

*¿Cómo dejarte— Vida!—  
Cómo salir del dulce corazón  
Hospitalario y pródigo,  
Como una patria fértil?  
Si para mí la tierra,  
Si para mí el espacio,  
¡Todos! son los que abarca  
El horizonte puro de tus brazos!  
Si para mí tu más allá es la Muerte,  
Sencillamente, prodigiosamente! . . .*

But life is still more. It can, perhaps, in its unending bounty, produce that new, that great, that formidable, that *superhuman* race to which she refers in so many of her poems:

*¿No parece el retoño prematuro  
De una gran raza que será mañana?*

*Así una raza incommovible, sana,  
Tallada a golpes sobre mármol duro,  
De las vastas campañas del futuro  
Desalojara a la familia humana! (II, 47)*

*Se dirían crisálidas de piedra  
De yo no sé qué formidable raza  
En una eterna espera inenarrable (I, 84)*

This we believe to be the essence of her life and of her love. She hoped, through love, to be instrumental in the flowering of that new race. And she was confident that the lover, too, was destined to be the co-author of that Superman that was to come, for he was:

*. . . flor augural de una estirpe suprema  
Que duplica los pétalos sensitivos del alma,  
Nata de azules sangres, aurisolar diadema  
Florecida en las sienes de la Raza! . . . (I, 97)*

and his lips:

*Labios tallados como blasones de una estirpe magna*

The analogy throughout is that of seeding, germinating, flowering. She herself was an ardent furrow awaiting the precious, fructiferous seed that was to produce so splendid a harvest:

*Así tendida soy un surco ardiente  
Donde puede nutrirse la simiente  
De otra Estirpe sublimemente loca! (I, 67)*

## DEATH

*No hay lágrimas que laven los besos de la Muerte . . .*

Death, the Somber Empress ("Emperatriz sombría"), very frequently enters the poems of Delmira Agustini—more or less as an adjunct or accessory to morbidity in the earlier books where there is an ardent need to live for love, the center—the *sine qua non*—of her universe; more subjectively, and with far more intensity of purpose in the later ones when rude awakenings and disillusionment have at times made her desirous of seeking the infallible opiates and stone bandages of death ("los opios infalibles / y . . . las vendas de piedra de la Muerte")—lethal oblivion, and eternal rest in its deep, narcotic pillow ("honda y narcótica almohada



de la muerte"). For as she comes to know more of life, she is, likewise, progressively cognizant of the power of death; and as her outlook, as her conception of it become more mature, the expression is more serene, more natural, more genuine, more complex, more original.

Life and death often appear linked in a very effective antithesis. At times this contrast seems to be effected naturally—as of one element flowing or melting into another:

*Donde todo vivía como herido de muerte* (II, 74)

*Lejos como en la muerte*  
*Siento arder una vida vuelta siempre hacia mí* (I, 23)

*En la muerte invariable de esa estatua*  
*¿No hay una extraña vida?* (II, 56)

*Copa de vida donde quiero y sueño*  
*Beber la muerte con fruición sombría . . .* (I, 42)

At others, the antithesis is more formal, as in the following "parallelisms":

*De todos esos vasos donde bebí la vida,*  
*De todos esos vasos donde la muerte bebo . . .* (I, 26)

*Jardinero de oro de la vida,*  
*Jardinero de fuego de la muerte* (I, 28)

*Imantado de vida, imantado de muerte . . .* (I, 44)

*Milagrosas de vivas, milagrosas de muertas* (I, 75)

*. . . No me mata la Vida*  
*No me mata la Muerte . . .* (II, 21)

Likewise love—omnipotent—sometimes wields in its mighty hand the most rapturous, the most intoxicating flower of death:

*Porque emerge en tu mano bella y fuerte,*  
*Como en broche de místicos diamantes*  
*El más embriagador lis de la Muerte* (I, 51)

Delmira Agustini glories in this somber love, and, paradoxically, longs to *drink death* in the "cup of life" of her lover's mouth—perhaps because, like death, this tenebrous love simultaneously *rots* and *ennobles*:

*—Gloria al amor sombrío,*  
*Como la Muerte pudre y ennoblece* (I, 22)

This predilection for the "amor sombrío" is evident only in *Los cálices vacíos* (1913) and in the last poems, those written but shortly before her death—a death that was to be the full blossoming of what she deemed the most powerful *rose of love*:

*Los lechos negros logran la más fuerte*  
*Rosa de amor; arraigan en la muerte* (I, 22)

The too-familiar and oft-thumbed picture of Death, stealthily awaiting his victim, scythe in readiness, which she gives in *El libro blanco* ("Crucé temblando la incierta / sombra de una galería / en que acechar parecía / la guadaña de la muerte"), is superseded by others of a more personal stamp:

*Porque emerge en tu mano bella y fuerte,  
Como en broche de místicos diamantes  
El más embriagador lis de la Muerte* (I, 51)

*Te inclinabas a mí, como un enfermo  
De la vida a los opios infalibles  
Y a las vendas de piedra de la Muerte  
.....*

*Te inclinabas a mí como al milagro  
De una ventana abierta al más allá . . .* (I, 62)

There are innumerable indirect references to death through the figurative use of funereal trappings and appurtenances such as shrouds, mourning, coffins, tombs . . .: "la mortaja copiosa de la calma"; [manos] "todo palidecidas de *amortajar* quimeras"; "si has muerto, / mi pena *enlutará* la alcoba lentamente"; "los pasados se cierran como los *ataúdes*"; "mi alma es negra *tumba*, fría como la nieve". And there is a certain morbid gusto in evoking the physical image of death as she describes the eye balls rolling in its throes ("luego fué un haz luciente de doradas estrellas; / . . . tal pupilas que mueren, se apagaron rodando . . ."), the sealed mouths ("y llevo / selladas mis heridas como las bocas muertas"), the hands livid and convulsively contracted ("tan blancas como de muerto", "crispadas las manos"). And although there are references to the corpse in general ("en la corriente / ví pasar un *cadáver* de fuego . . ."; "y en medio . . . un *cadáver* . . . crispadas las manos . . ."), she sometimes speaks merely of a specific part such as *dead heads of hair* ("cabelleras muertas"), *dead mouths* ("bocas muertas"), *dead head* ("cabeza muerta"), thus heightening the effect and making the picture more gruesome.

She speaks of the familiar aspects of death: of its coldness ("la frialdad magnífica de la muerte"), of the fear it inspires ("el Miedo erguido blandía / como un triunfo mi alma fuerte"), of its solitude and horror ("la Soledad llamaba en silencio al Horror"), of its rotting ("como la muerte pudre"), of its odor ("con un olor de muerte").

Yet we have seen that in relation to love, for instance, she speaks of death with great calm and naturalness—and at times even with eagerness, as of something for which she is yearning. And in that "sueño lúgubre" when she had the lover's dead head hungrily grasped in her hands, she felt less strange, less cold—she said—than later when, in life, she was to hold it again in her arms ("hoy la he visto en la Vida . . . / más frío me dió así que en el idilio / fúnebre aquel, al estrecharla muerta . . .").

In two poems of great tenderness and beauty, "Sobre una tumba cándida" (I, 37) and "El dios duerme" (I, 40), she gives us a calm, lovely, almost "celestial" vision of death and resurrection—entirely exempt from morbidity and gruesomeness.

Closely related to her conception of death and life, is that of the dire imminence of Fate, of an inexorable destiny—of the inalterable machinations of that "destino" to which she so repeatedly alludes:

*Y el Destino interpuso sus dos manos heladas . . .* (II, 29)

*. . . con el sello de un trágico destino* (II, 43)

*. . . manos colmadas de destinos*  
*Secretos . . .* (I, 26)

*Erase una cadena fuerte como un destino* (I, 61)

*El Destino me dijo maravillosamente* (II, 22)

*El porvenir es de miedo . . .*  
*¿Será tu destino un dedo*  
*De tempestad o de calma?* (I, 35)

*Tus manos alargadas de tenderse al Destino* (I, 87)

But the feeling of awe which pervades most people when referring to it is totally absent here, for she speaks of it with naturalness—even with familiarity. Destiny becomes almost tangible, for it is something the lover can bring her in his hands ("venías a traerme mi destino . . . en esas manos")—something she is later to put in his ("yo puse entre tus manos . . . mi destino"). It is secret, mysterious, strong. But love is stronger—or so she thought, before Destiny was to interpose with the icy hands of death . . .

### DREAMS

*. . . que sangre y alma se me va en los sueños . . .*

Dreams are more than a theme to Delmira Agustini for her entire work is born of that indistinction, ever apparent in her, between dream and reality:

*Hermano: a veces dudo si existes o te sueño* (I, 46)

*¿Acaso fué en un marco de ilusión*  
*En el profundo espejo del deseo,*  
*O fué divina y simplemente en vida*  
*Que yo te ví velar mi sueño la otra noche?* (I, 62)

So persistently do dreams enter and people her world, that reality in her is merely relative. It would be difficult, therefore, to trace in her poetry,



with any exactitude, the elusive line that divides dreams from reality. Most often her thoughts, her moods, her emotions, even, are the product of dreams; happy, sad, morbid dreams—dreams that cast a mystic veil over everything she touches. And so love—the emotion most prevalent in her—is commonly referred to, and analyzed, as something conceived of in dreams, as something dreamed of—even to the extent of the frequent use of the verb *soñar* when speaking of love or the lover:

*Imagina el amor que habré soñado* (II, 78)

*Yo lo soñé impetuoso, formidable y ardiente;*  
.....

*Luego soñélo triste, como un gran sol poniente*  
.....

*Y hoy sueño que es vibrante . . .* (II, 81)

*En mis sueños de amor, ¡yo soy serpiente!* (I, 36)

*Copa de vida donde quiero y sueño,  
Beber la muerte con fruición sombría* (I, 42)

*La intensa realidad de un sueño lúgubre  
Puso en mis manos tu cabeza muerta* (II, 18)

Most of her poems, then, are “dreams”—dreams of what might be, dreams of what was, dreams of what might have been . . . And that is why so many reveal the grotesque, misshapen contours with which dreams invest reality:

*Y los había bellos hasta el dolor, y feos  
Hasta la risa; irónicos, con afilados dientes  
Que desgarran sonriendo; rostros de camafeos  
Engarzados en cuerpos dúctiles de serpientes;  
Monstruos dioses con gestos indecisos y varios,  
—Miradas de demonios sobre sonrisas santas—* (II, 72)

*Que en tu sonrisa de cincuenta dientes  
Con un gran beso se prendió mi vida:  
Una rosa de labios* (I, 24)

Some of these “visions” make the heart light and hopeful (“Soñé divinas cosas . . .”), many merely unburden it—but some chill it and make it bitter for one’s entire life:

*—Hay bondas visiones, visiones que bielan,  
Visiones que amargan por toda una vida!*—(II, 53)

These dreams, these constant dreams, were a torture and a balm to her. A torture in that some—the most ardent, the most coveted—were never realized; a balm in that they were the one fresh and ever-verdant spot of refuge—“the oasis of life” as she once called them!

In a typical “Visión” (I, 62) she relates (with details of mounting intensity) the poignant experience of an ephemeral, elusive dream. She

describes it as an amorous adventure—with the lover receding into the shadows just when she was expecting him to take her in his “magnificent” embrace:

*¿Acaso fué en un marco de ilusión  
En el profundo espejo del deseo,  
O fué divina y simplemente en vida  
Que yo te ví velar mi sueño la otra noche?*

.....  
*Te inclinabas a mí supremamente,  
Como a la copa de cristal de un lago  
Sobre el mantel de fuego del desierto;  
Te inclinabas a mí, como un enfermo  
De la vida a los opios infalibles  
Y a las vendas de piedra de la Muerte;  
Te inclinabas a mí como el creyente  
A la oblea de cielo de la hostia . . .  
—Gota de nieve con sabor de estrellas  
Que alimenta los lirios de la Carne,  
Chispa de Dios que estrella los espíritus.—  
Te inclinabas a mí como el gran sauce  
De la Melancolía  
A las bondas lagunas del silencio;  
Te inclinabas a mí como la torre  
De mármol del Orgullo,  
Minada por un monstruo de tristeza,  
A la hermana solemne de su sombra . . .  
Te inclinabas a mí como si fuera  
Mi cuerpo la inicial de tu destino  
En la página oscura de mi lecho;  
Te inclinabas a mí como al milagro  
De una ventana abierta al más allá.*

*¡Y te inclinabas más que todo eso!*

*Y era mi mirada una culebra  
Apuntada entre zarzas de pestañas  
Al cisne reverente de tu cuerpo.  
Y era mi deseo una culebra  
Glisando entre los riscos de la sombra  
A la estatua de lirios de tu cuerpo!*

*Tú te inclinabas más y más . . . y tanto,  
Y tanto te inclinaste,  
Que mis flores eróticas son dobles,  
Y mi estrella es más grande desde entonces.  
Toda tu vida se imprimió en mi vida . . .*

*Yo esperaba suspensa el aletazo  
Del abrazo magnífico; un abrazo  
De cuatro brazos que la gloria viste  
De fiebre y de milagro, será un vuelo!  
Y pueden ser los hechizados brazos  
Cuatro raíces da una raza nueva:*

*Y esperaba suspensa el aletazo  
Del abrazo magnífico . . .  
Y cuando,  
Te abrí los ojos como un alma, y ví  
Que te hacías atrás y te envolvías  
En yo no sé qué pliegue inmenso de la sombra!*

(This poem synthesizes the tragic failure of Delmira's life—for she was always imagining that she was about to "lay hold" of an ideal, only to find frustration in another vain, barren dream).

Night holds a fascination for Delmira Agustini—perhaps because it is the time most attuned to her temperament; the time of shadows, of loneliness, of silence, of sadness and of mystery . . . and so fit a setting for her somber dreams:

*. . . ¿Por qué en las noches  
Las visiones sombrías se agigantan?*

Night, in tragic garb, either stands outside her window—sobbing—like an enormous widow:

*Fuera la noche en veste de tragedia solloza  
Como una enorme viuda pegada a mis cristales (I, 52)*

or stalks slowly into her room, dragging silence with her:

*La noche entró en la sala adormecida  
Arrastrando el silencio a pasos lentos . . . (II, 17)*

And in those hours of crushing sadness, when she weeps until life has practically left her ("tan triste que he llorado hasta quedar inerte"), night swallows up her tears like a black handkerchief ("la noche bebe el llanto como un pañuelo negro"). There is in her mind a definite and persistent association of night with loneliness, melancholy and tears—abetted by that insomnia which seemed to be an inevitable adjunct to those hours that nevertheless held for her:

*¡La belleza más grande y atrayente,  
La sublime belleza del misterio! (II, 102)*

Alfonso Reyes, who suggests the theme of tears as a fundamental chapter for potential anthologists of Spanish American poetry, would find ample illustrative material—of both "llanto y sombra"—in the poetry of Delmira Agustini. But the tears she speaks of, and refers to, with such insistence, are not the vain, empty ones of caprice, nor the unfounded ones of hysteria, but those that *bleed* (she uses the word "sangrar" in reference to weeping) from a wound that transcends the sensory, and that has, one might almost say, metaphysical roots. For her poetry reveals a spirit too profound, a grief too abysmal, to give itself so readily to the lachrymal refuge of the weak. And she who feels she incarnates "the livid aristocracy of pain"; who is inalterably enveloped in



the "pallid and torrential mantle" of her melancholy; who is dying not of life, not of death, not of love, but of *an ineffable thought* . . . undoubtedly weeps, as she once trembled, at the horror of an unfathomable gulf ("del horror de mi sima")—the vertiginous chasm that divides dreams from reality; at the torturing reflection of unattainable stars in the abyss of her longings—at, in short, "los astros del abismo"!

It is during the night, when the spiders of vigilance ("las arañas del desvelo") spin their webs of wakefulness, that many of her dreams take form. For there are nights, she says—black nights whose forehead is crowned with a rose of sunlight—when it is not possible to sleep:

*Esta noche hace insomnio;  
Hay noches negras, negras, que llevan en la frente  
Una rosa de sol . . .  
En estas noches negras y claras no se duerme (I, 52)*

It is then that thoughts of love, of life and death—somber, strange and morbid thoughts—crowd into her burning head. And, often, it is then, too, that she sits in bed and pens them feverishly—while they are still alive and glowing with the fire of actuality.

The result is a *mêlée* of distorted visions made up of half-truths, as all dreams are, and of monstrosities which her facile pen, driven by some dire force, so freely elaborates. She thinks of her bed, perforce, as the center of that weird universe; as the focus of those visions that encircle her when her imagination whirls on the fast-running wheels of insomnia—those visions which come to her "por todos los caminos de la noche" and which, inevitably, bring with them her never-long-absent companions: sadness and tears. Is it to be wondered at, then, that the word "lecho" in her poems should so repeatedly be associated with other such familiar ones as "tristeza" (sadness), "insomnio" (insomnia), "llorar" (weeping), "lágrimas" (tears)—even "muerte" (death)?

*Hoy han vuelto [mis amores]  
Por todos los senderos de la noche han venido  
A llorar en mi lecho (I, 25).  
El jardín de sus bocas . . .*

.....

*Humedecido en lágrimas  
Ha cercado mi lecho (I, 26)*

*Los lechos negros logran la más fuerte  
Rosa de amor; arraigan en la muerte.*

*Grandes lechos tendidos de tristeza,  
Tallados a puñal y doselados  
De insomnio . . .*

.....  
*Si así en un lecho como flor de muerte,  
Damos llorando, como un fruto fuerte' . . . (1, 22)*

Night, then, "tragic and sobbing night," creates the atmosphere; her room—that "alcoba agrandada de soledad y miedo"—the stage where those dreams unfold themselves:

*Mi cuarto . . .  
Por un bello milagro de la luz y del fuego  
Mi cuarto es una gruta de oro y gemas raras:  
Tiene un musgo tan suave, tan hondo de tapices,  
Y es tan vivida y cálida, tan dulce que me creo  
Dentro de un corazón . . . (I, 52)*

The time is now propitious, and everything is in readiness, as if by formula—the candles are extinguished, and the doors are shut so that Illusion may enter:

*Apaga las bujías para ver cosas bellas;  
Cierra todas las puertas para entrar la Ilusión;  
Arranca del Misterio un manojo de estrellas . . . (I, 34)*

The warm waves of perfume that rise from the flowers in her room serve as an opiate and induce sleep ("siento venir el sueño" . . .). And they assume rare shapes—one, that of a nun, as pale as wax, who opens with pointed and livid hands wide, mysterious doors whose threshold she tremblingly crosses:

*Y me parece que en la sombra vaga  
Surgir los veo de las flores pálidas,  
Y tienen bellas formas, raras formas . . .  
Uno es un mago ardiente de oro y púrpuras,  
Otro una monja de color de cera  
Como un gran lirio erguida,  
Y con dos manos afiladas, lívidas  
Que me abren amplias puertas ignoradas  
Que yo cruzo temblando (II, 55)*

These doors that lead to the Unknown, and which can only be reached in dreams, are those she seeks and gropes for incessantly. . . .

Most graphic are her descriptions of dreams. The lover appears before her like a giant toadstool, springing out of the corners of night—corners which are "damp with silence" and "greased with shadows and with loneliness":

*En mi alcoba agrandada de soledad y miedo  
Taciturno a mi lado apareciste  
Como un hongo gigante muerto y vivo,  
Brotando en los rincones de la noche  
Húmedos de silencio,  
Y engrasados de sombra y soledad (I, 62)*

Often the dreams are morbid and disclose the frequent presence of death—or the image of death:

*Y . . . en medio . . . un cadáver . . . crispadas las manos*  
*—Murieron abondando la trágica herida—*  
*Y en todo una nube de extraños gusanos*  
*Babeando rastreros el sacro fulgor! (II, 53)*

*. . . en la corriente*  
*Ví pasar un cadáver de fuego . . . Y locamente*  
*Me derrumbó en tu abrazo profundo la tristeza (I, 29)*

*La intensa realidad de un sueño lúgubre*  
*Puso en mis manos tu cabeza muerta;*  
*Yo la apresaba como hambriento buitre . . . (II, 18)*

*. . . las abiertas*  
*Cortinas dicen cabelleras muertas (I, 22)*

But the most tragic are those that burn into the mind, and scald, but do not emit a single gleam or spark. Those thoughts that, deeply rooted in one's life, devour soul and body, yet never burst into flower. This barren seed is buried in the innermost depths of one's being like a ferocious tooth. The flowering of it can only be comparable to the glory of holding, in one's hands, the head of God! This is the burning thought disclosed in "Lo inefable,"<sup>1</sup> one of Delmira Agustini's best poems.

All these dreams lie heavy upon her; they consume her very life, for they are too vast to be encompassed by human aspirations:

*Tú que sabes si pesan, si consumen*  
*Alma y sueños de olimpo en carne humana (II, 78)*

Yet this "Olympian soul"—even though forced to dwell in the "miserable dungeon of the human flesh"—was never too far distant from the celestial realms to which dreams so readily transported it. And these constant aerial flights of hers were not without balsamic fruit, for from them she always returned laden with glorious visions which fired and illuminated her otherwise drab existence. And, rather than acclimatize herself to the prosaic realities of life, she elevated everything to the heights of her aspirations and dreams, for her wings were steeped in all the miracles of life, of death, and of illusions (II, 26).

Delmira Agustini had ample time to dream, for there were many hours that she passed in solitude—divine solitude at times, sought by one who felt the need for the caressing calm of silence, for the life-soothing opiate to be found only in the timeless realm of dreams:

*Reino feliz donde se ignora el Tiempo*  
*Donde no alcanza la verdad amarga (II, 118)*

bitter loneliness at others, in the shadowy tower of her pride, with the silence about her dismal and chilling like an icy tomb, and the hours dragging by like a slow cortège, measured and cold. For pride lifts one

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 71- 72.



to cold and desolate heights of isolation which even the sun of friendliness and love cannot permeate. It binds some lives—with golden chains—to the gray walls of loneliness (II, 155). It is a tower of marble ("la torre de mármol del Orgullo"), an ever-growing rock ("la roca creciente del Orgullo"), a mounting mirador ("el mirador enhiesto . . .") on which one stands alone. As she buries her longing within herself—for pride is her Olympic sin ("el orgullo es mi pecado olímpico")—she is cut by the dreariness of it. Yes, she muses, the summits of life are lonely—so lonely and cold! And her soul becomes a desolate castle with the patina of boredom and the dampness of tears. She is a lonely prisoner in the dark and silent tower of her melancholy—avid for light. And like Darío's sad little princess, imprisoned in the grandeur of her laces and her silks, she too must wait until she is rescued and warmed by love, a love that was to fashion roses from the snow of her soul, and draw fire from the marble of her body . . .

Yet long before this she knew that her castle of pride would tumble, for, although young, she sensed that sooner or later those who walk in arrogance must someday show the bleeding wounds of life:

*Más tarde o más temprano, los soberbios  
Que el mundo cruzan con la frente erguida,  
Cantando olimpos, en el fiero pecho  
Han de mostrar la llaga de la vida* (II, 151)

This isolation which pride induces, then, is propitious for dreaming; for to dream one must have solitude and silence, and be still.

A great many poems reveal a preference for the sedentary—or, better still, the "reclinatorio"—type of life, by the repeated allusions to beds, divans, pillows, cushions, moss, etc. Rather than the world outside which affords no privacy, which has no doors that one can close with the "murmur of caress" ("con rumor de caricia"), or open with "the golden key" of love, Delmira Agustini preferred her room—"una gruta de oro y gemas raras"—which was her world, her haven, her sanctuary. Reclining on her "diván de calma", on her "lecho . . . blanco y vaporoso", or on one of those "grandes lechos tendidos de tristeza"; buried in her "cojines de abismo", or propped by her "almohada de estrella", she could invite dreams, or reverie, or inspiration which almost always did come when night entered, bringing silence with her. Gems, perfume, candlelight ("sueños a luz de cirios"), divans, cushions—oriental luxury—lulling the senses, inviting pleasure, voluptuousness, and, strangely enough, spiritual communion; for we have seen that as imperative to her as "las frutas deleitosas de la carne" were "las flores fantásticas del alma".

## IV

### STYLE

Delmira Agustini was ten years old when, in 1896, Rubén Darío published *Prosas profanas*—the book that was to set and establish the canons by which poets in Spanish America were to write for well over a decade. It is not strange, therefore, that her early poems should have borne so visibly the unmistakable stamp of the style and vocabulary then prevalent in countless books where the "Olympic swan of Leda" held sway. "Capricho" (of *La alborada*) and two poems included in *El libro blanco* ("El hada color de rosa" and "El poeta y la ilusión") are perfect examples of stereotyped Modernism. A stanza from each will reveal to what extent Delmira used the vocabulary and meters so overworked in her time:

*Entre el raso y los encajes de la alcoba parisina  
La enfermiza japonesa, la nostálgica ambarina,  
Se revuelve en las espumas de su lecho de marfil;  
El incendio de la fiebre ha pintado en sus mejillas  
—Sus mejillas japonesas como rosas amarillas—  
Sangraciones de claveles, centelleos de rubí (II, 124)*

*El hada color de rosa que mira como un diamante,  
El hada color de rosa que charla como un bulbul,  
A mi palacio una aurora llegó en su carro brillante,  
Esparciendo por mis salas un perfume de Estambul (II, 59)*

*La princesita hipsipilo, la vibrátil filigrana,  
—Princesita ojos turquesas esculpida en porcelana—  
Llamó una noche a mi puerta con sus manitas de lis.  
Vibró el cristal de su voz como una flauta galana (II, 66)*

But her earliest inspiration dates further back than Darío and the Modernists. Master of them all was Bécquer, and through Darío and the Uruguayan Juan Zorrilla de San Martín—if not directly—she was to succumb to the lure of the *vago*, the *incorpóreo*, the *brumoso* . . . For her early "musa gris", like that of the Spanish poet, was born

*. . . allá en el norte  
País de leyendas, de espectros y nieblas*

and therefore sang:

*De spleenes, de brumas, de auroras enfermas . . .*

In form and expression many of her early poems follow the pattern of the *Rimas*.<sup>1</sup>

The step from Bécquer to the Modernists was not a deviation from the paved road, since most of the latter—including Darío—took it. And soon the simplicity, the directness, which had been his legacy, floundered in the overwhelming sea of sensuousness, finery and luxury of which the swan became the symbol. "Rich" words like *rosa, encaje, marfil, rubí, oro, púrpura, plata*; and symbolic ones like *rosa, lirio, rojo, blanco*, became basic in her as in all Modernists. And, even more typical, the then popular *olifante, hipsipilo, clepsidra, nelumbo, crisálida, oriflama, bulbul* . . . which today appear so dated. The Modernists' flare for apotheosis made common usage of words like *sublime, soberano, soberbio, augusto, olímpico, divino, espléndido, magnífico, supremo, egregio*—so inherent a part of her vocabulary. Similarly Olympic, divine, non-earthly, were her favored *sobrehumano, extrahumano, ultrahumano*—in accord with her celestial visions, her superhuman aspirations, her ultramundane desires. The lure of the strange, the exotic, the mysterious prompted in her the repetitious use of words like *vago, extraño, misterioso* . . .

Like all Modernists (who inherited it from the Symbolists) she has a pronounced and vivid sense of color. Red and white predominate. These colors are used alone with surprising richness, or combined with that flare for contrast so characteristic in her ("*joya de sangre y luna*"; "*clavel vestido de lirio*" . . .). The list of objects suggestive of whiteness or purity used by Delmira Agustini is interminable. Precious stones (*ópalo, diamante, perla*), materials (*mármol, marfil, nácar, alabastro, plata, cera, armiño*), flowers (*lirio, azucena, azahar, nardo, jazmín, camelia*), animals (*cisne, paloma, cordero*), natural phenomena (*nieve, luna*), and other words (*espuma, nata*) are used in innumerable instances merely as descriptive of whiteness (*cisnes de marfil, cordero de nieve, alas lirio*) or, symbolically, to convey purity, chastity, calm, and other spiritual attributes (*un abrazo de alabastro, lirios . . . de pureza, armiños de castidad, cuerpos revestidos del armiño solemne de la calma, los lises hondos de vuestra alma*). The adjectives *albo, marmóreo, opalino, marfileño, nacareña, nacarino, nacáreo, alabastrino, perlado, niveo* tend to become repetitious in the earlier phase of her work. Somewhat less common is the use of

1 Cf. *Cuando abriendo tu boca perfumada,  
La voz dulce y perlada  
De tu bella garganta haces brotar,  
En voces de sirenas ideales,  
Y en arpas de sonidos celestiales,  
A mí me haces pensar.*  
("En un album," II, 97)  
*Ya del dulce crepúsculo  
Hanse extendido los flotantes velos,  
Gime el triste zorzal en la espesura,  
Manso susurra en el follaje el viento.*  
("Crepúsculo," II, 101)



words like *vaporoso*, *espumoso*, *pálido*, *lívido*, *claro* (mi techo es blanco y *vaporoso*, *espumosos* lirios, manos *lívidas*, flores *pálidas*, una *clara* corriente de diamante). Frequently, instead of an adjective of color, she names the material with which the analogy is made to suggest whiteness: *cordero de nieve*, flores *de ópalo*, rostro *de cera*, lirio *de alabastro*, cisnes *de marfil*, lirio *de armiño*, broche *de nácar* de la luna—a procedure familiar to all poets.

More or less the same is true of words used to suggest the color "red." *Rojo*, *carmin*, *escarlata*, *bermejo*—all varying degrees of redness—when not merely descriptive, are used in the universal connotation of passion and vice. *Fuego*, *llama*, *ascua*, *llaga*, *herida*, *sangre*, *rubí*, *vino*, *fresas*, *aurora*, *rubor*, *clavel*, *rosa*, and the adjectives *sangriento*, *encendido*, *ardiente*, *ígneo* are the words most frequently borrowed from their more direct usage to denote redness or passion. "Amor rojo, amor mío/*sangre* de mundos y *rubor* de cielos . . ." says Delmira, speaking of passionate love in one of the later poems. And in another: "Yo soy la *brasa candente* de un gran *clavel* de pasión." The mouth—passionate and red—in a single poem ("Boca a boca") is referred to as: "surco de *fuego*"; "joya de *sangre* y luna"; "tijera *ardiente*"; "ánfora *viviente*/donde brindan *delicias* y *delirios*/*fresas* de *aurora* en vino de *poniente*" . . .; "estuche de *encendidos* terciopelos"; "cáliz en donde el corazón *flamea*"; "pico rojo del buitre del deseo/que hubiste *sangre* y alma entre mi boca,/de tu largo y sonante picoteo/brotó una *llaga* como flor de roca" . . . (I, 42).

The usual symbolism is also observed in other colors: drabness and tedium are expressed by gray ("yo sé que tu vida es *gris*"; "incendió de oro y púrpura todo mi oriente *gris*"; "es una aurora *gris*"; "las arañas del tedio, las arañas más *grises*"); the illusory and dream world, the ideal, by blue ("los surcos *azurados* del ensueño sembramos"); illusions, hope, optimism, by rose—the color of dawn ("la aurora tendió el temblor *rosado* de su tul"; "ilusiones *sonrosadas*"). Black, suggestive of tragedy, and pain and somberness—although often used in descriptions, especially of eyes—is expressed by words like *night*, *midnight*, *shadow*, *mocha* ("y fluye de sus órbitas la *noche*"; "las dos tazas de *moka*/de tus pupilas"; "tus ojos son mis *medianoche*s crueles"; "la *medianoche* húmeda de tu mirar sin astros"). Other colors appear less frequently and are used in the direct sense.

But over and above what she had in common with all Modernists, one can discern—from the beginning, and more and more each time—her own and novel manner of expression.

Delmira Agustini's poems disclose a surprising and inexhaustible wealth of imagery. Her expression is so bound to the figurative that it is difficult to find a poem where thought or emotion are directly expressed. As her images and metaphors are more the result of concept, or

idea, than of emotion—more mental than physical—the sensory perceptions do not figure largely in her imagery. When they do, they do not present anything especially interesting or novel. Those that strike a more personal and characteristic note are the abstract ones, as when she speaks of dreams being so still that one can hear a wound bleed, or of hearing the hours pass sadly by—falling like petals. She refers to the unknown flavor of the enervating essence of the lover's soul, and to the taste of stars. And she perceives the smell of death in his voice—a voice that is touched by pallor in a grim moment of stark emotion. Soft thoughts touch her suffering brow, as would cool hands; her shadow trembles, like a soul, if one but touches it; and hands caress a memory . . .

Most of her images are visual:

*La medianoche húmeda de tu mirar sin astros* (II, 30)

*. . . mariposa ebria de sol, su cabellera* (I, 46)

*Maravilloso nido del vértigo, tu boca!*

*Dos pétalos de rosa abrochando un abismo . . .* (I, 54)

although some, naturally, are ruled by the other senses, as in the following lines where olfactive, gustative and tactile ones are used to describe the lover's tongue, hands and eyes:

*Pico de cuervo con olor de rosas,  
Aguijón enmelado de delicias  
Tu lengua es. Tus manos misteriosas  
Son garras enguantadas de caricias.*

*Tus ojos son mis medianoche crueles,  
Panales negros de malditas mieles . . .* (I, 28)

The images of taste, also, are most often used abstractly, as when she speaks of the bitter toadstools of loneliness ("amargos hongos de soledad") or of the sweet bitterness of tears ("es dulce el amargor del llanto"). Honey is almost always used to describe any sweetness—physical or spiritual. Images of food and of fruit also appear:

*Sufro vértigos ardientes  
Por las dos tazas de moka*

*De tus pupilas calientes;  
Me vuelvo peor que loca  
Por la crema de tus dientes  
En las fresas de tu boca* (I, 66)

But the most striking are those in which she speaks, morbidly, of the delight she finds in biting open wounds ("como en el oro de un panal mordiera . . ."), eating sores, drinking blood and tears . . .

She was, obviously, not very much concerned with the olfactive sense

as she seldom describes smell except in the most common and simplest terms: "laureles fragrantés", "perfume de espliego." There are times, however, when she gives an odor a moral, emotional or physical attribute: "perfume *santo*", "perfume *alegre*", "cálido perfume"; and there are others when she speaks of the odor of blood, or of death . . .

Her auditive images are not unusual. There are some that portray insistent sounds, such as those implied by the use of words like *cascabeleo*, *martilleo*—sometimes associated with movement: "en un *tijereteo* de luz y de candor", "vuelo *sonoro*." At times the rhythm, alive with sound images, is quick, vibrant, gay—with frequent use of onomatopoeia—as in "Carnaval" (II, 59-61):

*Frufrúes, tintines,  
Sedas, cascabeles,  
Collares de risas,  
Chillidos alegres!*

.....  
*Hervor de champaña,  
Chocar de cristales,  
Crujidos de sedas  
Y risas triunfales.*

At others, it is appropriately slow and dragging, as when she describes the grating produced by rusty hinges: "Rechinaron cruelmente los goznes enmohecidos" (II, 73). The usual laudatory attributes of voice and laughter: gold, pearls and crystal—metallic, mellow, clear—are used, at times, with characteristic and arresting beauty of image:

. . . *Siempre que yo quería  
El abanico de oro de su risa se abría . . .* (II, 34)

*Cuando tu voz . . .*

.....  
*Tendió su lazo de oro al borde de tu boca* (I, 54)

. . . *tu voz vino a recamar de oro  
Mis lóbregos silencios* (II, 84)

*Y en perlas de luz desgrana las risas de Extravagancia* (II, 50)

*Lloviznen los labios  
Perlado reír* (II, 60)

*Vibró el cristal de su voz como una flauta galana* (II, 66)

*Revivirá en mis bosques tu gran risa sonora  
Que los cruzaba alegre como el cristal de un río* (II, 83)

As she is seldom in contact with reality, her tactile images, like all others, reveal definite leanings towards the abstract. Elsewhere we have seen how hands, although sometimes gloved with caresses, always seem to touch as from afar. They form refreshing bandages for the scalding



wounds that mental pain inflicts; they caress the soul, and smooth out ruffled wings; and they support the weight of destiny . . . She feels the softness and the fire of the lover's glance, and the flowering of her soul—and of her flesh—when it lights upon her. And she rejoices in the painful sweetness of his kiss which bites the soul. Throughout, she uses *bandages, gloves, velvet* to imply softness and tenderness; *claws, daggers, teeth, fire* for longed-for torment and passion.

It is significant that her comparisons are so often suggestive of sadness and of weeping, of pain, of suffering, of death . . . as she speaks of life concentrating in the lover's eyes, like a filter of sadness in two deep vessels (I, 31); of the stream flowing sadly by, like the weeping of the blind (I, 29); of herself, dying of the tortures of a thought that scalds—yet is as mute and silent as a wound (II, 21); of the pasts, forever gone, and shut like coffins (I, 98), and of many other things:

[*Sus ojos*] *Se abren cansados y húmedos y tristes*  
*Como llagas de luz que se quejaron* (II, 70)

. . . *su boca tan tierna como un ruego* (II, 81)

*En el silencio siento pasar hora tras hora,*  
*Como un cortejo lento, acompasado y frío . . .* (II, 83)

*La noche bebe el llanto como un pañuelo negro* (I, 25)

*Fuera la noche en veste de tragedia solloza*  
*Como una enorme viuda pegada a mis cristales* (I, 52)

*Los sueños son tan quedos que una herida*  
*Sangrar se oiría . . .* (II, 17)

*Hablábanse un lenguaje sentido como un lloro* (II, 29)

There are many direct and veiled references to *pain*—mental and physical suffering—inflicted by the *dagger* of fire of the kiss, or by that which lies hidden in passionate hands; by the *claws* which such hands cunningly glove with caresses; by the fiery *darts* which gleam in the lover's eyes; by *teeth* which tear and rend as they smile; or by kisses which bite the soul, and by countless invisible *thorns* and *daggers* which cause *wounds* ("heridas") and *sores* ("llagas") to appear. Yet this pain is dulcified by the caressing bandages of the lover's fingers ("inefables bálsamos en las vendas . . . de tus dedos") and of his hands ("y llevo mis heridas . . . por tus buenas manos vendadas de delicias")—for love is the most efficacious balm, as well as the cause of so much suffering. (Yet for the pain that such sweet balsam cannot allay, there are the numbing bandages of madness, or the stony and everlasting ones of death!)

All the wounds of past anguish laugh through their blood-red lips when the rising sun of love appears ("todas las llagas del pasado ríen al sol naciente, por sus labios rojos"), for they have lips ("labios rojos") and

mouths<sup>1</sup> ("boca sangrienta"), yet they suffer in silence ("mudo como una herida") and can be heard bleeding only when dreams are very still ("los sueños son tan quedos que una herida sangrar se oiría"). Yet at times these wounds must show outward signs of pain, for eyes that are tired and humid and sad are likened to *plaintive wounds* of light ("como llagas de luz que se quejaron").

Wounds, like blood, are often associated with passion (as are the claws and daggers that inflict them). The mouth is a jewel of blood ("joya de sangre") and the adjective sometimes used to describe its redness is *sangriento* ("sangriento abismo"). As the kiss is a dagger of fire—and bites the soul—wounds spring like flowers from the ardent mouth ("brotó una llaga como flor de roca"). And she thirsts for the intoxicating vigor of the lover's blood. Like a vampire of love she avidly eats wounds she herself opened, and drinks the tears she caused to flow—tears that in her mind, as we have said, are associated with blood, for perhaps they are like the bleeding of mental wounds:

*Y exprimi . . .*

*Tu corazón . . .*

*. . . hasta sangrarlo en llanto (I, 96)*

*O su llanto sangraba una corriente más (II, 34)*

She frequently uses figures borrowed from dress. There are the usual references to the mantles, veils, folds of night, calm, melancholy, shadow . . . and the conventional personifications: Fantasy donning her gay, bejewelled gown ("Fantasía estrena un raro traje lleno de pedrería"), Night sobbing in her tragic garb ("la noche en veste de tragedia solloza"), the bride Snow unfolding her dazzling white veil ("la novia Nieve abre su blanco velo"), the sinking Sun, like a dying monarch, clothed in his scarlet mantle ("cuando el sol, como un rey, muera en su manto escarlata").

Materials (*seda, raso, satín, terciopelo, tul, gasa*), ribbons, gloves, fans, are very often referred to, as are the adornments of dress: jewels (*collares, broches, anillos*), gold, silver and precious stones (*perla, diamante, rubí, topacio, ópalo*)—the latter, especially, lending an air of luxury and richness to her verse so clearly steeped in the princely "pedrería" of Rubén Darío and his followers.

Especially interesting is the abstract quality lent to such palpable objects as gloves and fans, jewels, precious stones, and clothes in general; and the concrete attributes applied to mental states and abstracts. Thus, there are bodies clothed in desire—others, in the ermine of chastity. Her body envelops the lover like a veil, as he once covered her in the flaming cloth of his hands; and, tenderly ardent, his glance clothes her in velvet

<sup>1</sup> For the use of the metaphor: "the mouth of the wound," in general, see: G. Boussagol, "Por la boca de la herida," in *Hommage à Ernest Martinenche*, Paris, Editions d'Artrey, [1939], pp. 51-52.

and in fire. Her soul is shod in silence ("calzada de silencio") and dressed in calm ("vestida de calma")—while his, in a fold of his sidereal robe, carries away her destiny . . . Hands are sometimes gloved in ice, like those of the ones who have never plucked the delightful fruits of the flesh; and there are those that were born with gloves of caresses—while others are claws similarly "gloved" to allure with their pleasure-giving pain. Whenever she so desired, the lover would unfold the golden fan of his smile. Love is the vibrant necklace that adorns the throat of the world; the souls are jewelled with smiles and with weeping, the songs of her muse with tears, her hands with rings of mystery . . .

There are numerous examples of this artful and effective blending of the concrete and the abstract, for concrete actions and qualities are repeatedly applied to abstracts: her nostalgia has painted the loved one's profile on the huge veil of absence; if he is dead, her grief will slowly deck the room in mourning; grief becomes so inebriated in the glass of balsam that life proffers, that it dies of forgetfulness. And she speaks of the stain of grief or pain, of the patina of tedium, and of the color of thirst . . . Abstracts perform the function of the concrete as beds are spread with sadness and canopied with insomnia; the corners of the night are humid with silence and greased with shadows and with loneliness; her room is papered with the ermine of chastity and roofed with dreams.

Her metaphors sound scintillating depths of fantasy, and astound by their richness and variety. The most direct ones are those in which the image is like a definition or description of that to which it alludes:

*Las noches son caminos negros de las auroras* (I, 93)

*Tus manos son dos alas tranquilas* (I, 59)

*Su idilio fué una larga sonrisa a cuatro labios . . .* (II, 29)

This same process is often used in reverse, giving the image first:

*Pico de cuervo con olor de rosas,*

*Aguijón enmelado de delicias*

*Tu lengua es* (I, 28)

*Haz de la muerte, en un fatal soslayo*

*Son mis pupilas* (I, 36)

*Dos pildoras de insomnio y de hipnotismo*

*Son mis ojos* (I, 36)

The same, with the verb omitted:

*Horizontes violados sus ojerás* (II, 70)

*Mariposa ebria de sol, su cabellera* (I, 46)

Some metaphors are simple:

[Swan] *Clavel vestido de lirio* (I, 81)



But most frequently more than one line is needed to clarify the image:

*Pobres lágrimas mías las que glisan  
A la esponja sombría del Misterio . . .*

.....

*Pobre mi corazón que se desangra  
Como clepsidra trágica en silencio,  
Sin el milagro de inefables bálsamos  
En las vendas tremantes de tus dedos (I, 94)*

*Y desde el tabernáculo de vuestra castidad,  
Nevad a mi los lises hondos de vuestra alma (I, 21)*

There are those that call the object by the name of that with which it is associated; they identify it with its image. She speaks, for instance, of being imprisoned by the *chain of roses* of his arm ("la cadena de rosas de tu brazo"), or of thirsting for the *two cups of mocha* of his *warm pupils* ("Las dos tazas de moka/de tus pupilas calientes"). This is a very common process of Delmira Agustini:

*Vibró el cristal de su voz como una flauta galana (II, 66)*

*. . . en el clavel sonoro  
De su boca, miel suavisima (II, 66)*

*La taza rosa de tu boca en besos (I, 71)*

*¿En que tela de llamas me envolvieron  
Las arañas de nieve de tus manos? (I, 77)*

*. . . el sensitivo espejo  
De un lago claro . . . (I, 81)*

*. . . el gran broche  
De nácar de la luna abrió una noche . . . (II, 19)*

*. . . y las sendas sombrías  
De tus ojeras donde reconcí mis rastros! (II, 30)*

She is also fond of the use of appositive metaphor, where the image or images are in apposition with the things described:

*De todas estas bocas que florecen mi lecho:  
Vasos rojos o pálidos de miel o de amargura (I, 26)*

*Tus ojos son mis medianoches crueles,  
Panales negros de malditas mieles (I, 28)*

*Maravilloso nido del vértigo, tu boca!  
Dos pétalos de rosa abrochando un abismo . . . (I, 54)*

*Horizontes violados sus ojeras  
Dentro, sus ojos—dos estrellas de ámbar—(II, 70)*

*Buenas como cabezas  
Hermanas son las hondas almohadas:  
Plintos del Sueño y del Misterio gradas (I, 22)*

*Piedad para los ojos que aletean  
Espirituales párpados:  
Escamas de misterio,  
Negros telones de visiones rosas . . . (I, 85)*

Her use of running metaphor—more complex in that it involves two or more images—becomes definitely characteristic as she evolves the more baroque patterns of the later poems:

*Y era mi mirada una culebra  
Apuntada entre zarzas de pestañas,  
Al cisne reverente de tu cuerpo.  
Y era mi deseo una culebra  
Glisando entre los riscos de la sombra  
A la estatua de lirios de tu cuerpo! (I, 63)*

*Dios salve de sus ojos los dos largos estíos;  
Y mariposa ebria de sol, su cabellera;  
Y su boca, una rosa fresca sobre los ríos  
Del Fuego y la Armonía; y los vasos de cera*

*De sus manos colmadas de rosas de cariño;  
Y su cuerpo sin sombra que reviste un armiño  
De castidad sobre una púrpura de pasión . . . (I, 46)*

The following are examples of running appositive metaphors:

*Es un lago mi alma;  
Lago, vaso de cielo,  
Nido de estrellas en la noche calma,  
Copa del ave y de la flor, y suelo  
De los cisnes y el alma. (I, 31)*

*Un arroyo es mi alma;  
Larga caricia de cristal que rueda  
Sobre carne de seda,  
Camino de diamantes de la calma (I, 32)*

*. . . rosario fecundo,  
Collar vivo que encierra  
La garganta del mundo.*

*Cadena de la tierra,  
Constelación caída . . . (I, 24)*

But the high point of this technique is reached in "Boca a boca" (I, 42)<sup>1</sup>, "Selene" (I, 44)<sup>2</sup> and "En tus ojos" (I, 57)<sup>3</sup> which are made up entirely of successive images, each of which evinces once more the rich

<sup>1</sup> See p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> *Medallón de la noche con la imagen del día  
Y herido por la perla de la melancolía;  
Hogar de los espíritus, corazón del azul,  
La tristeza de novia en su torre de tul;  
Máscara del misterio o de la soledad,  
Clavada como un bongo sobre la inmensidad;*

mine—of vibrant thought and expression—to which Delmira Agustini had access.

Other formal or implied comparisons are constant, for her expression, as we said, is seldom direct. Images issue from her pen with such ease and fluency that one could devote many pages to the mere citing of the countless analogies that her highly imaginative and fanciful mind evokes. A more than cursory study of her imagery results in the discovery that she sometimes makes use of what we might call *reciprocal comparison*. That is, that if in one poem a current or stream is likened to a serpent ("la serpiente del arroyo"), in another her own serpent-like movements are likened to a stream ("En mis sueños de amor yo soy serpiente/gliso y ondulo como una corriente"). And, carrying the last thought further, if in her desire her body is like a ribbon of delight which glides and undulates like a caress ("mi cuerpo es una cinta de delicia/glisa y ondula como una caricia"), in another poem the current to which she likens her soul is called "a long caress of crystal which runs over silken flesh" ("Un arroyo es mi alma;/larga caricia de cristal que rueda/sobre carne de seda"). She frequently speaks of the mirrors of the lakes, of their crystal waters ("el sensitivo espejo de un lago claro") and later, of a mirror which is like an inclined lake ("en el helado más allá de un espejo/como un lago inclinado"). Similarly, eyes are likened to lakes ("lagos que son también una corriente") and she imbibes calm in the tranquil depths of the lover's pupils as in a lagoon ("bebo en ellas la calma como en una laguna"); but the lake, in another poem, is called the "blue pupil" of her park . . .

Nature for Delmira Agustini is not a theme, but merely a means of expression; for it is almost entirely subservient to her moods, and its presence in her poems, although constant, is most frequently limited to ideologic or sentimental analogies. The comparisons with nature—direct or implied—are incessant, for things (abstract and concrete) and emotions, when serene, gentle or pure, are likened to lakes or doves or lilies; when turbulent, fiery, tempestuous, passionate, are compared to the sea, the sun, wild animals, beasts of prey, roses and carnations. There is the

---

Primer sueño del mundo, florecido en el cielo,  
 O la primer blasfemia suspendida en su vuelo . . .  
 Gran lirio astralizado, copa de luz y niebla,  
 Caricia o quemadura del sol en la tiniebla;  
 Bruja eléctrica y pálida que orienta en los caminos,  
 Extravía en las almas, hipnotiza destinos . . .  
 Desposada del mundo en magnética ronda;  
 Sonámbula celeste paso a paso de blonda;  
 Patria blanca o siniestra de lirios o de cirios,  
 Oblea de pureza, pastilla de delirios;  
 Talismán del abismo, melancólico y fuerte,  
 Imantado de vida, imantado de muerte . . .  
 A veces me pareces una tumba sin dueño . . .  
 Y a veces . . . una cuna ¡toda blanca! tendida de esperanza y de ensueño . . .

<sup>3</sup> See p. 95.



usual symbolism ascribed to dawn and spring; to the night, the moon, the stars—all of which are also used descriptively. Thus, in speaking of the lover's dark, humid, yet lusterless eyes, she refers to "the humid mid-night" of his "starless glance" ("la medianoche húmeda de tu mirar sin astros").

Consequently all the celestial and terrestrial components of nature that enter her poems are almost never used *per se*, but always with the definite purpose of elucidating or defining an intricate mental or emotional state. Thus, flowers are used repeatedly, but seldom merely as adornment or *décor*—for she is far more concerned with her *inner garden*<sup>1</sup> in which she can be, at will, "el lirio de alabastro leve" or "un gran clavel de pasión." And rather than the "flores opalinas" which crowd her oriental vase, or the "alegres margaritas" which she sometimes gathers in the fields, she prefers the fragrant flower of their kiss, the burning calix of the lover's mouth, the petals of his body—or of her soul—the twin buds of his eyes . . .

In the earlier poems her treatment of nature is more conventional, and there is a great deal of personification—imaginative, although rather forced and banal in its imagery: the Sun sinks in the west like a defeated monarch clad in purple or in scarlet; the hand of Twilight goes about its nightly task of lighting up a candle in each star; the bride Snow in her white veil trembles and swoons beneath the kisses of the Sky; bleak Dawn, worn out and spent and without splendor, arises from the shadowy bed of Night. But in *Los cálices vacíos* and the posthumous poems she seldom uses the more familiar patterns, and as she strips herself of borrowed trappings of thought and expression, she emerges vibrant and gleaming in the somber or fiery cloth of her own design.

The over-worked mantle and spreading wings of night ("la noche tendiendo su *manto* de gasa negra" II, 104; "El ángel renegrido de la noche, sus *alas* de azabache ya esta abriendo" II, 101) are spared in the following descriptions.

*Fuera la noche en veste de tragedia solloza  
Como una enorme viuda pegada a mis cristales* (I, 52)  
*La noche bebe el llanto como un pañuelo negro* (I, 25)

Her figures of speech are more varied, more personal—not abounding in trite comparisons and personifications:

*Yo iba sola al Misterio bajo un sol de locura,  
Y tú me derramaste tu sombra, peregrino;  
Tu mirada fué buena como una senda oscura,  
Como una senda húmeda que vendara el camino* (I, 41)

<sup>1</sup> She could aptly have said, like Darío:

*El dueño fuí de mi jardín de sueño,  
Lleno de rosas y de cisnes vagos . . .*  
("Cantos de vida y esperanza").

*Su mirada me viste de terciopelo y fuego,  
 O me vierte dos copas de tiniebla y de oro  
 O abre en rosas mi carne con un cálido riego:  
 Su cuerpo hecho de pétalos de placer y de encanto,  
 Corola el cáliz negro de la melancolía . . . (I, 47)*  
*¡Oh, Tú que me arrancaste a la torre más fuerte!  
 Que alzaste suavemente la sombra como un velo,  
 Que me lograste rosas en la nieve del alma,  
 Que me lograste llamas en el mármol del cuerpo;  
 Que hiciste todo un lago con cisnes, de mi lloro . . . (I, 56)*

The figurative language flows smoothly as if one image naturally depended on the other:

*¿Tu acuerdas? . . . El arroyo fué la serpiente buena . . .  
 Fluía triste y triste como un llanto de ciego,  
 Cuando en las piedras grises donde arraiga la pena,  
 Como un inmenso lirio, se levantó tu ruego (I, 29)*  
*Te inclinabas a mí como el gran sauce  
 De la Melancolía  
 A las bondas lagunas del silencio;  
 . . . . .  
 Y era mi mirada una culebra  
 Apuntada entre zarzas de pestañas,  
 Al cisne reverente de tu cuerpo.  
 Y era mi deseo una culebra  
 Glisando entre los riscos de la sombra  
 A la estatua de lirios de tu cuerpo! (I, 63)*

Also, in this later phase of her work, she adopts the procedure of describing by a series of images which convey to the reader a lyric and vivid picture, as well as the richness and variety of her expression. This can be seen in the descriptions of a lake, a fountain, a stream—all of which represent her soul—in "Diario espiritual" (I, 31), and of the moon in "Selene" (I, 44). The same method is followed in "Boca a boca" (I, 42) where elements of nature are borrowed to achieve a unique description of the lover's mouth:

*Surco de fuego donde logra Ensueño  
 Fuertes semillas de melancolía  
 . . . . .  
 Joya de sangre y luna, vaso pleno  
 De rosas de silencio y de armonía . . .  
 . . . . .  
 Tijera ardiente de glaciales lirios . . .  
 . . . . .  
 Cáliz en donde el corazón flamea.  
 . . . . .  
 Pico rojo del buitre del deseo.*

In the somewhat Versaillesque landscape of Delmira Agustini—with its gardens, its statues, its fountains, its flowers, its swans—the lakes (the “blue pupils” of her parks) occupy a place of eminence. Their presence in her poems is constant, lending an air of peace and serenity by the stillness of their unruffled waters. They are limpid, and silent, and they mirror the sky in their azure cloth of crystal. And that is why she likens a soul to a lake: “diríase una tela de cristal y de calma . . . / espejo de pureza que abrillantas los astros / y reflejas la sima de la Vida en un cielo”. As the lake is the “cup of bird and flower”, so the pupils, at times, are deep depositories wherein one imbibes calm “como en una laguna,” and the lover, athirst with longing, leans over her as over the cup of crystal of a lake: “Te inclinabas a mí . . . / como a la copa de cristal de un lago” . . .

Yet the lake is seldom seen without what Delmira calls its soul: the swan (“alma de un lago es un cisne”):

. . . el cisne azul  
Que tiende en sus lagos de oro su cuello siempre al Levante (II, 50)

Los cisnes de marfil tienden los cuellos  
En las lagunas pálidas (II, 69)

. . . hiciste todo un lago con cisnes de mi lloro . . . (I, 56)

Yo soy el cisne errante de los sangrientos rastros  
Voy manchando los lagos y remontando el vuelo (I, 80)

The swan has always been a symbol of aristocratic beauty. Jupiter, disguised as the prince of birds, wooed Leda and begot Helen—she of “the face that launched a thousand ships and burned the topless towers of Ilium.” The external beauty of the bird, the gleaming whiteness of its plumage, its grace of line and movement, its aristocratic bearing—all have furnished poets with material for countless references and apt symbolism. Its whiteness has been used to designate purity of thought, of inspiration, or of being; its princely qualities compared to those that poets share in contrast with surrounding vulgarity.

But to the Modernists, headed by Ruben Darío, the swan became not only the symbol of beauty, of grace, of richness, but *the* symbol of their poetry:

¡Oh Cisne! . . .

.....

Bajo tus blancas alas la nueva Poesía  
Concibe en una gloria de luz y de armonía  
La Helena eterna y pura que encarna el ideal.

Darío (*Prosas profanas*)

The Wagnerian swan—with its idealistic and romantic connotations—



found refuge in the azure lakes that the Modernists fashioned, when the vogue of *Lohengrin*<sup>1</sup> was at its height.

Pedro Salinas<sup>2</sup> in his analysis of the swan theme<sup>3</sup> in the poetry of the Modernists attributes Darío's frequent use of it to its dual significance based on the Hellenic Jupiter-Leda theme (carnal passion, sensuality) and the romantic and sentimental one that Wagner popularized in *Lohengrin*—both so much a part of the Nicaraguan poet and of his work. Darío's overfondness for the rich, the sumptuous, the extravagant, can also find much material for fine and fancy imagery in "el ebúrneo cisne", "el alado aristócrata", "el ave eucarística" . . . It was this quality of fatuous elegance—of mere adornment—that the swan sometimes assumed in the poems of those who followed Darío's precepts in art, that drove the Mexican poet Enrique González Martínez to his famous battle-cry of "Tuércele el cuello al cisne de engañoso plumaje" ("Twist the neck of the swan of deceiving plumage"), which can be said to have ushered in a new era in Spanish American poetry.

Delmira Agustini makes use of all the pagan and romantic qualities attributed to the swan by countless poets, and, as we have indicated, it is an indispensable adjunct to her parks of reverie ("parques de ensueño") and lakes of gold ("lagos de oro"). The swan as a symbol of life, of happiness, gleams radiantly through the lake of her tears; as a symbol of aspiration, of avidity for light, the blue swan in the lake of gold forever extends its neck to the east. At times the serpent of desire glides in her glance to the swan-like whiteness and purity of the lover's body; at others, she, the errant swan, leaves bloody traces of passion on the clear and calm lake of his soul . . . But there is nothing ethereal, nothing spiritual, in the somber poem "El cisne" where "the flower of the air, the flower of the water . . . grave and gentle as a prince," proud and white and soft, glares significantly at her through rare human eyes ("raros ojos humanos") that long to find a sweet, warm haven for the flaming beak!

Another animal that enters her poetic world with its two-fold symbolism based on its color and gentleness, and on its erotic implication owing to its being the favorite bird of Venus, is the dove. In contrast to the dashing strength and fierceness of the savage colts (of quick and powerful thought) or the soaring eagles (imagination, inspiration or aspiration), Delmira at times prefers the snow-white dove (simplicity, unpretentiousness, levity of thought). Her body holds a tempting feast of rose-hued

<sup>1</sup> Darío speaks reverently of "el cisne wagneriano"; Delmira twice evokes "the Wagnerian profile" of her lover; while Herrera y Reissig, with his flare for the extravagant, coins a verb from the Master's name: "wagneriaba" . . .

<sup>2</sup> "El cisne y el buho (Apuntes para la historia de la poesía modernista)", in *Revista Iberoamericana*, Mexico, 1940, II, no. 3, pp. 55-77; reprinted in his book: *Literatura española, siglo XX*, Mexico, 1941, pp. 83-124.

<sup>3</sup> See also Alfonso Reyes, "De volatería literaria" in *El cazador. Ensayos y divagaciones* (1911-1920), Madrid, 1921, pp. 99-105.

doves for the vultures of the lover's appetite, while the serpents of desire lie in wait for the sky-blue doves that they surmise are in the flesh.

In our treatment of the theme of love we saw how serpents and snakes are almost invariably associated with desire which glides stealthily through the fibres of one's being; and that love itself is a "rosario imantado de serpientes". Vultures always signify carnal appetite ("para sus buitres en mi carne entrego/todo un enjambre de palomas rosas"); ravens—that long to satiate their hunger in the rosy pulp of the flesh ("los cuervos negros sufren hambre de carne rosa")—represent the somber passions.

The eagles are the birds that can scale the heights of inspiration, for their law is their caprice, their limit: the boundless sky. They are large and proud and strong—these "aves de las cumbres"—and their eyes are filled with the glory of Olympus. They bring back with them those magnificent visions of august lineage which the poet can then fashion. The spider, with its incessant, tireless weaving represents monotony, tedium—or the unending hours of sleeplessness.

Animal characteristics and actions are attributed to elements of nature and to abstracts. The speed and the fury of wild horses, or other beasts—with manes dishevelled—is suggested in the word-picture of a blind hurricane, a raging sea:

*Fantásticos tropes  
Desmelenados de los huracanes* (II, 28)

*Y el mar, al pie, agolpándose en la piedra y la arena,  
Rompe, azota, revuelca su intrincada melena* (II, 48)

Misery licking the hand of Christ; her heart sleeping at the feet of her idols, suggest the meekness and servility of a domestic animal:

*La Miseria lamía su mano . . .* (II, 43)

*Y era tal mi piedad, y era tal mi cariño,  
Que a sus pies todo de ellos mi corazón dormía* (II, 73)

The use of the verb *aullar* in referring to the lover's voice evokes the doleful cry of a dog:

*Y tu voz, de muy lejos, con un olor de muerte,  
Vino a aullarme al oído un triste "¡Nunca más!"* (I, 93)

that of the verb *viborear* recalls the familiar figure of a serpent, as desire glides through the veins of the swan:

*Viborean en sus venas  
Filtros dos veces humanos!* (I, 82)

But far more significant than the animals—used almost always in the accepted symbolic sense—are the constant references and allusions to every conceivable form of germination and flowering: idealistic and real; mental

and physical; germination and flowering in mind, in soul, in thought, in emotion, in body . . . Her vocabulary, therefore, abounds in words like *raíz, entraña, surco, semilla, simiente, retoño, fruto, flor, fértil, sembrar, arrancar* (root, womb, furrow, seed, shoot, fruit, flower, fertile, to plant, to pluck).

We have already spoken of her expressed hope that some day—through the union of those who are the choicest of the race, the cream of the blue bloods ("la espuma de la raza", "nata de azules sangres")—this earth might give birth to that "raza nueva", that "formidable raza", that "estirpe magna, suprema . . . celeste . . . sobrehumana" of which she felt a part:

*Así tendida soy un surco ardiente,  
Donde puede nutrirse la simiente,  
De otra Estirpe sublimemente loca!* (I, 67)

And love is the road that might lead to the creation of that "gran raza que será mañana"—love, a root nurtured in the womb of Heaven and Hell, the blood-red juice of whose powerful fruit is imbibed through four ardent lips:

*Raíz nutrida en la entraña del Cielo y del Averno,  
Viene a dar a la tierra el fuerte fruto eterno  
Cuyo sangriento zumo se bebe a cuatro labios!* (I, 100)

And so the mouth becomes a furrow of fire where fantasy begets strong seeds of melancholy:

*Surco de fuego donde logra Ensueño  
Fuertes semillas de melancolía* (I, 42)

She wants to plant the azure furrow of dreams with a yet unconceived, palpitating seed, and the summits of life with superhuman kisses:

*—Los surcos azurados del Ensueño sembramos  
De alguna palpitante simiente inconcebida  
Que arda en florecimientos imprevistos y extremos;  
Y al ámparo inefable de los cielos sembramos  
De besos extrahumanos las cumbres de la Vida!* (I, 100)

The seed—the thought, the idea, the urge, the desire, the dream—is planted in hope, but it is its flowering—its outward expression, its fulfillment, its realization—that brings ineffable joy. And that is why there is nothing more tragic, more soul-rending, than a burning thought that can find no adequate expression. This idea is synthesized and poignantly expressed in "Lo inefable".<sup>1</sup> She must have felt the agony of unrealized thoughts and hopes—and the joys of fulfillment, for her poetry is alive with the flowers that spring from almost every one of its lines.

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 71-72.



The use of *flor* in general, is the most frequent. But we have seen with what insistence she refers to roses, lilies, carnations, etc. Some flowers are sensuous and warm, some calm and cool; some radiant, some somber; some white and pure, some red and ardent. That is what determines their symbolism. The flowers that most often appear—as symbolic of passion and chastity, of sensual love and purity—are *roses* and *lilies*, dear to all poets. Most frequently they are used alone, but sometimes together to imply a contrast:

*Eras rosa en su lecho, eres lirio en su fosa* (I, 40)

*Lirio que el rubor vistió de rosa* (I, 24)

or a duality:

*Caigamos en un ramo de rosas y de lirios . . .* (I, 53)

We give the following quotations from her poems, beginning with *El libro blanco*, to show the repeated—one might say *excessive*—use of “rosa” and “lirio”:

*Y una frente que erguida su corona reclame  
De rosas, de diamantes, de estrellas o de espinas!* (II, 51)

*Yo tengo el alma de rosa, frescuras de flor temprana* (II, 66)

*Ansia de sol, de rosas, de caricias, de vida . . .* (II, 71)

*Abran mis rosas su frescura regia  
A la sombra indeleble de tus palmas!* (II, 84)

*¡Ah, yo me siento abrir como una rosa!* (II, 85)

*Marchítense las rosas de mi aurora  
A la sombra indeleble de tus palmas!* (II, 85)

*Así lloré el dolor de las beridas  
Y la embriaguez opiada de las rosas . . .* (II, 20)

*Y vuelvo toda en rosas como una primavera,  
Arrojada en tu fuego* (II, 24)

*. . . la aprisiona  
La cadena de rosas de tu brazo* (I, 51)

*Hay noches negras, negras, que llevan en la frente  
Una rosa de sol* (I, 52)

*—Maravilloso nido del vértigo, tu boca!  
Dos pétalos de rosa abrochando un abismo . . .*—(I, 54)

*. . . me lograste rosas en la nieve del alma* (I, 56)

*Su cuerpo excelso derramado en fuego  
Sobre mi cuerpo desmayado en rosas!* (I, 67)

*. . . prendieron en mi pecho  
La rosa del Encanto* (I, 78)

*Y el silencio es una rosa  
Sobre su pico de fuego . . . (I, 83)*

*Los lechos negros logran la más fuerte  
Rosa de amor . . . (I, 22)*

*Con un gran beso se prendió mi vida:  
Una rosa de labios (I, 24)*

*Cabezas que sonrosa la rosa del ensueño (I, 25)*

*Con lises de armonía o rosas de silencio (I, 26)*

*Pico de cuervo con olor de rosas (I, 28)*

*Prendía sobre él una rosa de fuego (I, 29)*

*Para tu musa en rosa, me abro en rosa (I, 30)*

*O con un lirio místico que es su arma, mi alma  
Apagará una a una las rosas de tu lecho! (I, 34)*

*. . . ardían los vasos de rosas de cariño (I, 37)*

*En mi cuerpo . . .*

*.....*

*Tu sombra logra rosas de fuego en el hogar;*

*Y en mi alma . . .*

*¡Tu sombra logra rosas de nieve en el hogar! (I, 41)*

*[Boca] . . . vaso pleno*

*De rosas de silencio y de armonía (I, 42)*

*Y su boca, una rosa fresca sobre los ríos*

*Del Fuego y la Armonía . . . (I, 46)*

*. . . sus manos colmadas de rosas de cariño (I, 46)*

*Su mirada . . .*

*. . . abre en rosas mi carne . . . (I, 47)*

*. . . arde una bienvenida de rosas en el suelo (I, 47)*

*Mi cúpula los cielos, mi cáliz el de un lirio (II, 57)*

*[Mi corazón] . . . el gran capullo, hinchado, de un gran lirio  
de armiño (II, 73)*

*Albo lirio . . . (I, 99)*

*. . . llévame por la vida*

*Prendida como un lirio sobre tu corazón! (I, 99)*

*—¡Oh, dulce, dulce lirio! . . . Llave de las alburas! (I, 99)*

*Soy caída y erguida como un lirio a tus plantas (I, 56)*

*Erase una cadena fuerte come un destino*

*.....*

*La corté con un lirio (I, 61)*

*Gota de nieve con sabor de estrellas  
Que alimenta los lirios de la Carne* (I, 63)

*Y era mi deseo una culebra  
Glisando entre los riscos de la sombra  
A la estatua de lirios de tu cuerpo!* (I, 63)

*Toda de blanca vestida  
Toda sabumada de lirio!* (I, 66)

[*Tus manos*] *Ellas me alzaron como un lirio roto  
De mi tristeza como de un pantano* (I, 77)

[*Cisne*] *Clavel vestido de lirio* (I, 81)

*Grandes lirios marmóreos de pureza* (I, 85)

—*Amor de blanco y frío,  
Amor de estatuas, lirios, astros, dioses . . .* (I, 21)

*Desbojar hacia el mal el lirio de una veste* (I, 23)

*Come un inmenso lirio se levantó tu ruego* (I, 29)

*Cuando derrama en los hombros puros  
De tu musa la túnica de nieve,  
Yo concentro mis pétalos oscuros  
Y soy el lirio de alabastro leve* (I, 30)

*Mi alma es todo un mar,  
.....*

*Donde ni un lirio puede naufragar* (I, 32)

*O con el lirio místico que es su arma, mi alma  
Apagará una a una las rosas de tu lecho!* (I, 34)

[*Boca*] *Tijera ardiente de glaciales lirios* (I, 43)

[*Boca*] *Lirio de muerte . . .* (I, 43)

[*Selene*] *Gran lirio astralizado . . .  
.....*

*Patria blanca o siniestra de lirios o de cirios* (I, 44)

But the flower does not always appear in its entirety. Often merely a part is used as when she speaks of calices, corollas, petals, buds . . . Simple analogies are the most frequent:

*Mi cúpula los cielos, mi cáliz el de un lirio* (II, 57)

[*Boca*] *Cáliz en donde el corazón flamea* (I, 43)

*La eléctrica corola que hoy despliego  
Brinda el nectario de un jardín de Esposas* (I, 67)

*Como en pétalos flojos yo desmayo a tu hechizo . . .* (I, 98)



*Con el blasón supremo de tu diente  
En los pétalos todos de mi vida!* (II, 87)

[*Ojos*] *Capullos de dos noches imprevistas* (I, 57)

But sometimes she evolves more complex ones, like the following:

*Las corolas de oro de mis lámparas  
De insomnio deshojaron,  
Abrieron deslumbrantes los dormidos  
Capullos de mis astros,  
Y gráciles prendieron en mi pecho  
La rosa del Encanto* (I, 77)

*Su cuerpo hecho de pétalos de placer y de encanto,  
Corola el cáliz negro de la melancolía* (I, 47)

*Mi lira era un capullo; sus dos brazos  
Abrieron armoniosos como pétalos  
De una animada flor maravillosa . . .* (II, 33)

Flowers are used to designate mental as well as physical states, spiritual as well as carnal, for they spring from the soul ("las flores fantásticas del alma") as well as from the flesh:

*Yo tengo el alma de rosa, frescuras de flor temprana* (II, 66)

*. . . los pétalos sensitivos del alma* (I, 97)

*Y desde el tabernáculo de vuestra castidad,  
Nevad a mí los lises hondos de vuestra alma . . .* (I, 21)

As we have shown elsewhere, flowers are used most often in reference to love, as an excrescence which it inspires:

*Que me lograste rosas en la nieve del alma* (I, 56)

*Y tanto te inclinaste,  
Que mis flores eróticas son dobles* (I, 63)

*Florecerá tu frente como una tierra opima,  
Cuando en tu almohada . . .  
Mis rizos se derramen . . .* (I, 98)

But not infrequently does she use them in other instances, as when she speaks of the flowering of her lyre:

*Mi lira era un capullo; sus dos brazos  
Abrieron armoniosos como pétalos* (II, 33)

or of the statues awaiting life or death in "terrible and magnificent" buds:

*En capullos terribles y magníficos  
Esperan a la Vida o a la Muerte . . .* (I, 84)

The most persistent elements of nature in her poems are the sun, the dawn, the day, the night, the moon, the stars, lakes, streams. Flowers, as

we have said repeatedly, appear in one form or another in almost every one of her poems, but trees are totally absent if we discount the palms that occasionally appear in the oases of her deserts, and the laurels to which she aspires . . . Spring (mostly), autumn and winter appear symbolically; summer, but once in a description of the lover's eyes: "Dios salve de sus ojos los dos largos *estíos*" (I, 46). Rain, which Juana de Ibarbourou loves so deeply, hardly enters her poems, unless it is in a figurative and transitive sense: "pleno sol; *llueve* fuego; *lloviznen* los labios perlado reír; *lluvias* de colores." Snow appears more frequently in personifications ("la novia *Nieve* abre su blanco velo"), in comparisons ("blanca como la *nieve*"), in descriptions ("la blanca *nieve* de la luna"); symbolically ("Cuando derrama en los hombros puros / de tu musa la túnica de *nieve*"), and transitively, like rain ("*nevad* a mi dos lises hondos de vuestra alma").

One can see that the many joys that poets find in nature—in its streams, in its sunsets, in the warmth and sweetness of the sun-bathed and flower-sprayed earth—is lacking in Delmira Agustini, for she is not a poet of nature like Juana de Ibarbourou, for instance. But never does she succumb to the "decadence" of Julián del Casal who sometime before her had expressed his aversion to nature and his preference for all that was artificial and urban in his well known poem "En el campo":

*A mis sentidos lánguidos arroba  
Más que el olor de un bosque de caoba,  
El ambiente enfermizo de una alcoba.*

*Mucho más que las selvas tropicales,  
Pláceme los sombríos arrabales,  
Que encierran las vetustas capitales . . .*

In common with all poets Delmira Agustini makes abundant use of what is known as "atmospheric" imagery. For there is a somewhat *set* vocabulary for the expressing of certain moods, of certain tones. Joy, sadness, fear, pain, mystery, hope, passion . . . all have their particular set of words which induce in the reader's mind the thought or mood that the author is trying to convey. Several examples drawn from her poems will best illustrate Delmira Agustini's use of words to convey a mood—her vocabulary being quite conventional throughout.

In "El poeta leva el ancla" (II, 41), in a gay and radiant mood, she sets out on the sea of poetry, ignorant of the fate that awaits her, but hopeful. Every line of the beginning of this poem contains one or more of the words that form what one might call "the vocabulary of optimism":

*El ancla de oro canta . . . la vela azul asciende  
Como el ala de un sueño abierta al nuevo día.  
Partamos, musa mía!  
Ante la prora alegre un bello mar se extiende.*

*En el oriente claro como un cristal, esplende  
El fanal sonrosado de Aurora. Fantasía  
Estrena un raro traje lleno de pedrería  
Para vagar brillante por las olas.*

*Ya tiende  
La vela azul a Eolo su oriflama de raso . . .*

Love which is the synthesis of all that is good—and more—brings light, warmth, perfume, melody (the sun, the flower, the song) into her life which was buried in the damp and dreary shadows of her loneliness. *Roses* (color, life, perfume) and *fire* (light, warmth) appear most frequently as symbolic of the tonic effects of love—as the expression of life and happiness:

*Oh, Tú . . . . .*  
*. . . . .*

*Que me lograste rosas en la nieve del alma,  
Que me lograste llamas en el mármol del cuerpo (I, 56)*

*Cuando el frío me ciñe doloroso sudario,  
Lívida vengo a ti,  
. . . . .*

*Y vuelvo toda en rosas como una primavera,  
Arrojada en tu fuego (II, 24)*

*Su mirada . . .  
. . . abre en rosas mi carne con un cálido riego (I, 47)*

*. . . hermano  
A tu paso . . .  
. . . . .*

*. . . arde una bienvenida de rosas en el suelo (I, 47)*

The sun of love ("tu amor . . . es como un *sol* muy fuerte") which caused the fire of passion to burn and the roses of fulfillment to spring, also floods her spirit with its radiant light and spreads its threads of gold through the dismal halls of her sadness. It awakens her soul which had lain dormant in the silent tomb of the unending hours. With its vibrant gold, the lover's voice brocades the somber cloth of her silence, while he himself breaks the thread of pearls of her weeping and opens her drab horizon to the glory of the rising sun:

*Tú despertaste mi alma adormecida  
En la tumba silente de las horas;  
A ti la primer sangre de mi vida  
¡En los vasos de luz de mis auroras!*

*¡Ah, tu voz vino a recamar de oro  
Mis lóbregos silencios; tú rompiste  
El gran hilo de perlas de mi lloro,  
Y al sol naciente mi horizonte abriste (II, 84)*



And in the tragic night of her solitude the golden key of love sings in her lock:

*Amor, la noche estaba trágica y sollozante  
Cuando tu llave de oro cantó en mi cerradura* (II, 82)

One can see, then, that to express happiness, hope, life, love, plenitude, fulfillment, Delmira uses elements suggestive of brightness, color, vitality, gaiety, beauty (*brillante, gemas, pedrería, oro, azul, rosado, sangre, rosas, cantar, reír, alegre, bello*), of warmth and light (*fuego, llama, sol, luz*). Dawn, which ushers in the new day, is symbolic of youth, of illusions, of hope—as is spring, with its promise of new life, new growth.

Yet Delmira is a somber poetess. Her songs of gladness and light and life are almost always clouded over by the imminence of sadness and shadows and death. Melancholy and tears are more characteristic and persistent in her than joy and laughter. Night, the moon, the stars ("los ojos suspensos de la noche")—rather than day, the sun . . . furnish her with more felicitous metaphors and lines.

And even as happiness, life, love, were light, sun, warmth, fire—sadness and loneliness are darkness, shadows, cold, humidity . . . Alone in the sunless tower of her melancholy she sits in silence and in tears, watching the spiders spin their webs of tedium and the toadstools of loneliness spring up:

*Yo vivía en la torre inclinada  
De la Melancolía . . .  
Las arañas del tedio, las arañas más grises,  
En silencio y en gris tejían y tejían.  
  
¡Oh, la húmeda torre! . . .  
Llena de la presencia  
Siniestra de un gran buho,  
Como un alma en pena;  
  
Tan mudo que el Silencio en la torre es dos veces;  
Tan triste, que sin verlo nos da frío la inmensa  
Sombra de su tristeza.  
.....  
O caza las arañas del tedio, o traga amargos  
Hongos de soledad* (I, 55)

And she sees the lover himself like a giant toadstool springing out of the dark and humid corners of the night.

These key or tonic words reappear throughout her entire work for Delmira Agustini's vocabulary is anything but varied. There are very many words which recur with almost monotonous insistence—perhaps because she always associates certain ones with a specific thought or mood. Thus the words *lago* and *laguna*, used concretely and in the abstract—pictorially, descriptively, symbolically—and the associatives *calma, cristal,*

*espejo*, can only vie in frequency with the *vasos, copas, tazas, panales, mieles* of bodies, hands, mouths; and the *flores, lirios, rosas, capullos, pétalos, cálices, corolas* which tend to make her vocabulary somewhat static.

We have seen how in her dreams, in her desires, in her pride, she rises beyond human reach. It is natural, therefore, that words like *alas, cumbres, cielo, águilas, torre*, as well as the adjectives *sublime, soberano, soberbio, augusto, egregio, divino, olímpico*, should form so permanent a fixture of her vocabulary. In contrast to the heights (*alturas*) are the depths (*abismo, sima*) and the adjectives *hondo, profundo*. Pillows are deep ("las *bondas* almohadas", "cojines de *abismo*", "tu almohada . . . *bonda* como una *sima*") and the sleep that they induce is profound, although none more so than that brought on by the narcotic pillow of death ("duermes tan *hondo* que no despiertas", "*bonda* y narcótica almohada de la muerte"). Deep and profound in another sense—for they sound the very depths of one's being—are also love, the embrace ("abrazo *profundo*"), the kiss ("y se besaban *hondo* . . ."). The eyes, so deep ("dos *vasos profundos*", "eléctricos cerrojos de *profundas* estancias", "*fondos* marinos"), are sometimes likened to an abyss ("dos ojos de *abismo*", "bocas de *abismo* en labios centelleantes"), as is the mouth ("sangriento *abismo*", "verja de *abismos* es tu dentadura", "dos pétalos de rosa abrochando un *abismo*") and her entire body when offered to the lover ("soy un pomo de *abismo*"). And as an abyss produces vertigo or giddiness, so does the lover's mouth: "maravilloso nido del *vértigo* tu boca", and his eyes: "sufro *vértigos* ardientes / por las dos tazas de moka / de tus pupilas calientes" . . .

Light (*luz*) and shadow (*sombra*) appear incessantly, as do the corresponding adjectives *brillante, reluciente, fúlgido, claro, obscuro, sombrío* . . .; light as symbolic of hope, of happiness, as against shadows which are synonymous with despair, sadness, loneliness; dawn (with its promise of a long new day ahead) as against night which shuts out the ray of light with its "wings of jet." Yet, in spite of its "tragic garb," night is not wholly devoid of hope, for as winter in Shelley's ode held a promise of inevitable spring, it is the black road that leads to the rosy plains of dawn ("las noches son caminos negros de las auroras"). The shadows, she asks, are they not a compact procession of women in mourning marching towards the light? ("¿Las tinieblas no son una compacta / procesión de mujeres enlutadas / marchando hacia la luz?").<sup>1</sup> Only the power of love can bring the sun into the humid towers of her loneliness, the light into the shadowy depths of her soul, the dawn into the nocturnal paths

<sup>1</sup> Casal, in "Laus noctis", gives a similar image:

*Las horas de la noche, cual pálidas mujeres  
Que marchan en las filas de sacra procesión . . .*

of her spirit . . . For only love, with its radiance and warmth, can cause jubilant flowers of fulfillment to spring forth from the sterile lakes of tears and sadness.

The words *estatua*, *escultura*, *mármol*, *tallar*, also form an integral part of the vocabulary of this woman, who, pulsating with life and vibrant with passion, asks Eros if he has never felt pity for the statues from whose marmoreal shoulders falls the copious shroud of calm ("Plegaria"). And the sight of one prompts her prayer to God: to stir that body, clad in timeless tranquility; to give it a soul, that it may no longer be the miserable, inert thing that it is—more lowly than a worm! Yet at times she is aware that theirs is an *august* calm and that that coldness, that serenity, that immobility and immutability are the qualities that shield them from the bondage of the flesh. Theirs, then, is the future—for they are like chrysalises of stone, premature buds of that great race that filled her Nietzschean hopes—a healthy race, majestic and serene, carved with mighty blows upon the hard, unyielding marble of impassiveness.

Other favored words are *perfil* (profile), used repeatedly instead of the entire figure or face ("tu wagneriano *perfil*"; "una llaça tu *perfil* arcano"); *nata*, which like *espuma* suggests the cream, the choicest part of things ("nata de agua lustral en vaso de alabastro", "nata de azules sangres"); *sello* (seal or stamp), which is, at times, associated with destiny ("con el *sello* de un trágico destino", "tu *sello* puede ser un blasón o un estigma"), and *mancha* (stain, spot, blot), used most often in the abstract sense, as when she speaks of the stain of grief or pain, or the livid and somber one that marks her hand when the lover's image, which she held, vanishes, or that which her body makes against the lights and shadows. The verb *borrar* (to efface, to rub out) is used several times as night effaces the afternoon, forgetfulness obliterates the past, and a docile soul, now wiped away from her life, is wistfully and tenderly recalled. The verb *brotar* (to spring or sprout, to gush) is applied equally to life which springs forth like a wild sea when love beckons; to the tranquil flow of tears which issues from her once obdurate spirit; and to the flowering of a wound by the steady "hammering" of a too-fervent mouth.

If one adds the words which inevitably appear in related groups, like those that are associated with loneliness and tears (*orgullo*, *torre*, *soledad*, *silencio*, *tedio*, *melancolía*, *tristeza*, *lágrimas*, *humedad*, *bongo*) and those that pertain to color, to parts of the body, to elements of nature, and the adjectives which are constantly repeated, one can readily see that this poetess fashioned her deep and haunting poems with a relatively small and unvaried vocabulary which she wielded with great insight, power and imagination.

Yet it is not necessarily the richness of a poet's vocabulary, nor even the words he chooses that are most important, but the special and wholly personal meaning they sometimes assume by their juxtaposition with others,



by the symbolism and figurative meaning ascribed to them, or by the specific thought they are made to convey. For a true poet's expression is always ruled over and dictated by a total and complex inner harmony that prompts him to express himself in an often obscure way. Familiarity with an author's work, however, tends to lessen these problems considerably, for as concepts and words reappear, one can almost invariably determine their once-elusive significance. A poet, moreover, is prone to follow through a certain thought, clarifying words and expressions which out of context would naturally be meaningless.

Thus, Delmira Agustini may speak of the "amargos *hongos* de soledad" (bitter fungi of loneliness), but as she had already referred to the shadows of sadness and the damp tower of melancholy, one can see how from the shadows and darkness of loneliness (for it is devoid of the light—joy—of companionship) and its ever-present dampness (caused by the lack of sun—happiness, and the incessant flow of tears—sadness) such fungi might spring. The familiar word *hongo*, therefore, is here invested with a specific, figurative meaning made more effective by its association with an abstract word (*hongos* de *soledad*). The same word is used almost identically in the following lines of another poem:

*En mi alcoba agrandada de soledad y miedo,  
Taciturno a mi lado apareciste  
Como un hongo gigante, muerto y vivo,  
Brotando en los rincones de la noche  
Húmedos de silencio,  
Y engrasados de sombra y soledad* (I, 62)

And one can see how the word *soledad* repeatedly evokes in her mind the word *hongo* for in "Selene" she again uses them together:

*Máscara del misterio o de la soledad,  
Clavada como un hongo sobre la inmensidad* (I, 44)

When in the poem "Plegaria" she says, referring to chastity:

*Piedad para las pulcras cabelleras  
.....  
Peinadas como lagos* (I, 85)

(have pity on the pretty heads of hair, combed like lakes) the use of the word "lake" as indicative of smooth, unruffled hair is appropriate and exact if one remembers that in many of her poems the words *lago*, *laguna* stand for peace, calm, serenity. Similarly, eyes that reflect peace of spirit in their humid depths are like lagoons in which she satiates her thirst of calm.

It is in the forging of images that Delmira Agustini excels, yet she essays other stylistic feats—such as synecdoche, metonymy, sinesthesia, etc.—as do all poets.

An attribute, a characteristic, an emotion which applies to the entire body or person is often used for a part: the open curtains reveal dead heads of hair ("las abiertas cortinas dicen *cabelleras muertas*"); her muse passes, with a sad mouth ("es que ella pasa con su *boca triste*"). Eyes are cruel, fingers wise, hands good. The swan's neck is sad and proud ("*cuello triste y orgulloso*"), the lover's pupils are warm, the swan's beak afire . . .

The emotion revealed in these transposed epithets is sometimes that of the agent ("*cuello orgulloso*", "*pupilas cálidas*"), sometimes that of the observer ("en su boca, miel *suavísima*", [tus pupilas] "*redondas y oscuras como mundos lejanos y medrosos*"; "*sombra helante*"). Her own moods are reflected in that which surrounds her: *sad* afternoons, *happy* spring, *gay* daisies. Her own sadness is transmitted to the night which is always associated with sadness and tears:

*Fuera la noche en veste de tragedia solloza . . .* (I, 52)

*. . . la noche estaba trágica y sollozante . . .* (II, 82)

*La noche bebe el llanto como un pañuelo negro* (I, 25)

Her own fears are communicated to the room when night enters it: "En la sala *medrosa* entró la noche"; her own happiness to the key that *sings* in her lock when love enters her life: "cuando tu llave de oro *cantó* en mi cerradura" . . . And there is adept use of synesthesia, or "transposed sensation," as she speaks of the *tiredness* of the hour, the *drowsy* room when night stalks in, and the *tragic* and *sobbing* night; the *gay* perfume which emanates from rustic flowers, the *happy* sound that issues from empty porcelain.

The contrast which was so apparent in her life ("A veces ¡toda! soy alma/Y a veces ¡toda! soy cuerpo") is ever-present in her work. Even some of the titles of her books convey antithesis. The last poems were to bear the provocative one: *El rosario de Eros*—using the word "rosary", intimately related to Christian prayer, in conjunction with the pagan god of love. Another title which she had composed, but which was never used during her lifetime, was that of *Los astros del abismo*, joining the two antithetical words "constellations" and "abyss" in a significant and characteristic manner. And as the function of the calix is to hold and contain, and, therefore, can hardly be called "empty", one can sense antithesis in the title of her third book: *Los cálices vacíos*.

We have seen how she can seldom speak of life without evoking the image of death; how both are blended in love which is the synthesis of

all: the soul and the flesh, good and evil, pleasure and pain, light and shadow. To express these contrasts she employs countless analogies, countless forms.

There is what one may call a mental or abstract contrast (of ideas) and a physical or formal one (of form). Certain thoughts are usually associated in her mind with their opposites:

*Naúfraga de la luz, yo me abogaba en la sombra . . . (I, 56)*

*Piedad para las manos enguantadas  
De hielo, que no arrancan  
Los frutos deleitosos de la carne  
Ni las flores fantásticas del alma (I, 85)*

*Eras rosa en su lecho, eres lirio en su fosa (I, 40)*

*El placer unges de dolor (I, 42)*

*Imantado de vida, imantado de muerte (I, 44)*

*Amor es todo el Bien y todo el Mal (I, 100)*

*El cisne asusta de rojo,  
Y yo de blanca doy miedo (I, 83)*

Mental as well as formal are the following, which follow a definite rhythmic pattern:

*¡Y esperarás sonriendo y esperarás llorando! (I, 34)*

*Como flor de inocencia  
Como espuma de vicio! (I, 52)*

At times the contrast is two-fold:

*Vasos rojos o pálidos de miel o de amargura (I, 26)*

*. . . ánfora viviente  
Donde brindan delicias y delirios  
Fresas de aurora en vino de Poniente . . . (I, 43)*

*Con alma fúlgida y carne sombría . . . (I, 51)*

*Si se durmió llorando, que al despertar sonría . . . (I, 40)*

*¡Hastiada siempre de lumbre  
Siempre de sombras sedienta! (I, 105)*

*Y otras cosas más bajas y sombrías  
Con otras más brillantes y más altas! (II, 33)*

Contrast, repetition, parallelism, make the following very effective:

*De todos esos vasos donde bebí la vida,  
De todos esos vasos donde la muerte bebo . . . (I, 26)*

*Ven a mí: mente a mente;  
Ven a mí: ¡cuerpo a cuerpo! (I, 27)*



—*A veces ¡toda! soy alma;  
Y a veces ¡toda! soy cuerpo*—(I, 83)

*Manos que sois de la Vida,  
Manos que sois del Ensueño;  
Manos que me disteis gloria,  
Manos que me disteis miedo!* (I, 78)

The assimilation of contrasts is not infrequent: the mouth kisses from a distance, and calls in silence:

*Boca que besas a distancia y llamas  
En silencio . . .* (I, 42)

For at times silence mentions her by name ("mi silencio te nombra") but at others, even silence is still ("y todo! hasta el silencio, calla"). Bodies are saintly clad in desire, and she longs to drink death from the cup of life of the lover's mouth . . .

She also makes use of what is familiarly known as the "reversal of nature." And as countless poets before her have done, she very frequently associates heat with cold, as she speaks of the warm snow of the moon, of the fire that chills, of the icy spiders of the lover's hands enveloping her in a cloth of fire, and of the ardent scissors formed of glacial lilies, which is his mouth ("tijera ardiente de glaciales lirios")—a mouth which is also humid with flames ("húmeda de llamas"). She finds haven under the bright light of the palms in the shadows of the desert—perhaps, because, as she says, experience has taught her that shadow gives light, and light shadow . . .

Sometimes she makes a statement of the *nonsequitur* type: the chosen lover is the saddest, because he is the most loved; and he has arrived first, because he came from the most distant place ("Tú eres el más triste, por ser el más querido. / Tú has llegado el primero por venir de más lejos" . . .); they speak of his death so clearly that she cannot understand ("Ha muerto . . . ha muerto" . . . dicen tan claro que no entiendo").

The joining of direct opposites by the conjunctions *and* or *or* is striking, as antithetical attitudes and thoughts co-exist, and one and the same thing can simultaneously be two opposite ones, or result in totally opposite reactions. Thus the lover may appear to her as a giant toadstool, *dead* and *alive*, while she *lives* and *dies* of one and the same glorious thirst. The same star causes her spirit to *rise* or to *sink*, and she is both *prostrate* and *erect*, like a lily, at the lover's feet. The same rare ring of destiny casts a *light* and a *shadow* on her life; nights are simultaneously *black* and *light*, and souls are jewelled with *smiles* and with *tears*:

*Taciturno a mi lado apareciste  
Como un bongo gigante, muerto y vivo* (I, 62)  
*Y vivo y muero de una sed gloriosa* (I, 30)

*Estrella, casi alma, con que asciendo o me hundo* (I, 74)

*Soy caída y erguida como un lirio a tus plantas* (I, 56)

But of these dual composites the most unique are those in which something is defined as being, at one time, *all* of one thing and *all* of its opposite:

*Amor es todo el Bien y todo el Mal* (I, 100)

[*Amor*] *Que todas las tinieblas y todo el iris viste* (II, 81)

*Ojos a toda luz y a toda sombra!* (I, 57)

. . . *De tus manos, más bellas*

*Fluyen todas las sombras y todas las estrellas* (I, 59)

. . . *mi alma herida*

*Por todo el Mal y todo el Bien . . .* (II, 20)

Delmira Agustini makes constant use of repetition. This repetition occurs most often in the initial word or words:

*Ritmaban alas angélicas,  
Ritmaban manos luzbéticas* (I, 45)

*Toda de blanco vestida,  
Toda sabumada de lirio!* (I, 66)

*Como a la torre dúctil,  
Como a la torre única  
.....*

*Eres la presa única,  
Eres la presa eterna!  
.....*

*Si para mí la tierra,  
Si para mí el espacio . . .* (II, 24-25)

*Luego será mi carne en la vuestra perdida . . .  
Luego será mi alma en la vuestra diluida . . .  
Luego será la gloria . . .* (I, 21)

*Tú me dirás qué has hecho de mi primer suspiro,  
Tú me dirás qué has hecho del sueño de aquel beso . . .  
Me dirás si lloraste cuando te dejé solo . . .  
¡Y me dirás si has muerto! . . .* (I, 27)

and with more insistence:

*Hay cabezas doradas a sol, como maduras . . .  
Hay cabezas tocadas de sombra y de misterio,  
Cabezas coronadas de una espina invisible,  
Cabezas que sonrosa la rosa del ensueño,  
Cabezas que se doblan a cojines de abismo,  
Cabezas que quisieran descansar en el cielo . . .* (I, 25)

*Y las manos, las manos colmadas de destinos  
 Secretos y alhajadas de anillos de misterio . . .  
 Hay manos que nacieron con guantes de caricia,  
 Manos que están colmadas de la flor del deseo,  
 Manos en que se siente un puñal nunca visto,  
 Manos en que se ve un intangible cetro . . . (I, 26)*

Sometimes the repetition occurs within a line, or lines:

*Hay bondas visiones, visiones que hielan,  
 Visiones que amargan . . . (II, 53)*

*Muchas cosas me cuentan, muchas cosas . . . (II, 55)*

*¡Oh, flores, me embriagáis y sois tan blancas!  
 Tan blancas que alumbráis . . . (II, 55)*

There are poems in which certain words reappear throughout, not in successive lines as in the examples given above, but at well-gauged intervals—lending great musicality to the rhythm, and emphasis and intensity to the thought. The phrase “a ti vengo”, and, reversed: “vengo a ti”, appears in seven out of the nine stanzas of “¡Vida!”<sup>1</sup>—always, with one exception, at the beginning of the stanza. “Te inclinabas a mí” is repeated seven times in twenty-three lines of “Visión”<sup>2</sup>, and is followed by slight variations, with the thought always going in crescendo: “y te inclinabas más que todo eso”, to culminate in:

*Tú te inclinabas más y más . . . y tanto,  
 Y tanto te inclinaste,  
 Que mis flores eróticas son dobles . . .*

Similarly, in “Plegaria”<sup>3</sup> the word *piedad* is repeated nine times in the course of about forty lines, in a sort of litany which ends with the effective repetition: “piedad, piedad, piedad”. Prayer-like, also, is the repeated and fervent “¡Tú me lo des, Dios mío!” which appears at the end of four of the “cuentas” of “El rosario de Eros” (I, 21). In “Cuentas falsas” it cynically becomes: “Siempre lo dé, Dios mío” . . .

At times an entire thought, and even a stanza, is repeated, like a refrain. In “Plegaria” the two lines:

*—Eros: ¿acaso no sentiste nunca  
 Piedad de las estatuas?*

open and close the poem, and appear once more within it. With the exception of one word, the same occurs in “El surtidor de oro” (I, 71) where the lines:

*Vibre, mi musa, el surtidor de oro  
 La taza rosa de tu boca en besos . . .*

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 98-99.

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 105-106.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 85.



open the two-stanza poem. The same, with the word "selle" substituted for "vibre" appear at the beginning and at the end of the second stanza. In "Supremo idilio" (I, 97) the first and last stanzas have many similarities, but some significant changes:

*En el balcón romántico de un castillo adormido  
Que los ojos suspensos de la Noche adiamantan,  
Una figura blanca hasta la luz . . . Erguido  
Bajo el balcón romántico del castillo adormido,  
Un cuerpo tenebroso . . . Alternándose cantan.*  
.....

*En el balcón romántico de un castillo adormido  
Que los ojos suspensos de la Noche adiamantan,  
El Silencio y la Sombra se acarician sin ruido . . .  
Bajo el balcón romántico del castillo adormido  
Un fuerte claro-oscuro y dos voces que cantan . . .*

We sometimes find lines within a poem repeated with slight, but meaningful variations:

*El olor de tu sangre,  
El color de tu sangre  
Flamean en los picos ávidos de mis águilas (II, 24)*

*Los cuervos negros sufren hambre de carne rosa;  
En engañosa luna mi escultura reflejo,  
Ellos rompen sus picos, martillando el espejo,  
Y al alejarme irónica, intocada y gloriosa,  
Los cuervos negros vuelan hartos de carne rosa (I, 24)*

*En mi cuerpo, una torre de recuerdo y espera  
Que se siente de mármol y se sueña de cera,  
Tu sombra logra rosas de fuego en el hogar;  
Y en mi alma, un castillo desolado y sonoro  
Con pátinas de tedio y humedades de lloro,*

*¡Tu sombra logra rosas de nieve en el hogar! (I, 41)*

In "La copa del amor" (II, 84) the last two lines of the first stanza read:

*Abran mis rosas su frescura regia  
A la sombra indeleble de tus palmas!*

—the last two of the final one:

*¡Marchítense las rosas de mi aurora  
A la sombra indeleble de tus palmas!*

A feat of more conscious styling is the use of what one might call "repetition in reverse" as in the following:

*Es blanca y es honda, muy honda y muy blanca (II, 135)*

*Y en el silencio abondado de tiniebla,  
Y en la tiniebla abondada de silencio . . . (I, 24)*

*Seré en tus cielos negros el fanal de una estrella  
Seré en tus mares turbios la estrella de un fanal* (I, 99)

Characteristic of her style is the constant use of multiple or accumulative adjectives, nouns or verbs which occur in series of from three to as many as eight:

*Amor es milagroso, invencible y eterno* (I, 100)

*Y al alejarme irónica, intocada y gloriosa . . .* (I, 24)

*Mi corazón es miel, perfume y fuego* (I, 30)

*¡Oh frescura! ¡Oh pureza! ¡Oh sensación divina!* (II, 44)

*Yo la quiero cambiante, misteriosa y compleja;*  
.....

*Y que vibre, y desmaye, y llore, y ruja, y cante,  
Y sea águila, tigre, paloma en un instante,  
Que el Universo quepa en sus ansias divinas;  
Tenga una voz que hiele, que suspenda, que inflame,  
Y una frente que erguida su corona reclame  
De rosas, de diamantes, de estrellas o de espinas!* (II, 51)

*Ansia de sol, de rosas, de caricias, de vida* (II, 71)

*Fiera de amor yo sufro hambre de corazones  
De palomas, de buitres, de corzos o leones* (I, 73)

*El es por sí, por su divina esencia,  
Música, luz, color, fuerza, belleza!* (II, 45)

*Indefinidos, verdes, grises, azules, negros* (I, 26)

*¿Sabes todas las cosas palpitantes,  
Inanimadas, claras, tenebrosas,  
Dulces, horrendas, juntas o distantes,  
Que pueden ser tus ojos? . . .* (I, 57)

In her versification, as in all other aspects of her style, we find a like development, and similar characteristics. In the first poems we see Delmira Agustini employ the forms most common in her time—that is, the traditional ones and those of the romantic period which Modernism adopted and continued to use, and some of the new ones which this movement evolved and generalized. At the same time, from the beginning, one can see some of Delmira's innovations and particular tendencies, which will later be developed and become characteristic of the last phase of her work. We cannot divide her poetry into definite periods as to her metrical forms because she continues to use the same ones throughout her entire work; what changes in the course of her various books is the proportion in the use of the diverse verse forms and tendencies.

If we wish to classify these, we can divide them into three types of versification: regular, with consonantal or perfect rhyme; the more flexible

one, but also regular, with assonance; and, finally, irregular meter or free verse. This latter type, although represented by fewer poems, is that which we consider the most characteristic and original in Delmira, because it is the one she uses progressively more and more, and with greater liberty and deliberation, in the poems where her originality reaches its highest point. This tendency towards metrical freedom, moreover, may be seen, from the first, in the irregularities she introduces into her most regular versification.

Characteristic of Delmira's versification is the predominance of consonantal rhyme within the totality of her work. The abundance of it does not signify great variety, for only a few of the traditional and romantic forms, and some, also, of Modernism are present. The most characteristic verse of the latter: the Alexandrine, is the dominant one, used in forty-three of the seventy-five poems of this type. Likewise, the preferred strophic form is the sonnet<sup>1</sup> of which there is a total of forty-three (twenty-six in Alexandrines, eleven hendecasyllabic, four octosyllabic and two of sixteen syllable lines). Of the eight compositions in octosyllables (the most common in Spanish traditional poetry), four are sonnets, very rare in this form—a form which, nonetheless, was used by Rubén Darío and other Modernists, and which can be considered characteristic of this movement. The eleven syllable verse, which is second to the Alexandrine in number, and the strophic forms in which it appears, are the same ones used by the Modernists, notably Gutiérrez Nájera and Díaz Mirón, with whose work Delmira was undoubtedly familiar. She also uses the hendecasyllables with the modernist accentuation that Rubén Darío introduced.

All this signifies that Delmira Agustini adopted the metrical forms which were most in use when she began to write, with a certain restraint which we can consider typically post-modernist. And although it may seem that there is in her a tendency towards the regular and difficult versification, which would make her similar to the Modernists, she is, however, conservative in this sense, and does not propose to be a "virtuoso" nor an innovator. On the contrary, the tendency which one discerns beneath her perfection and regularity is that of breaking with it with great frequency, and in many ways.

There is a total of twenty-four poems of regular versification with assonant rhyme. The verse of eleven syllables predominates in 13 poems, in 6 of which verses of eleven and seven syllables are combined. The dominant form is the *romance*, i.e. the rhyme in even lines. The traditional *romances* of eight and six syllables, which Modernism also adopted, are rarer. The predominant influence in the assonant versification of Delmira is that of Bécquer and his Spanish American disciples, such as Gutiérrez Nájera and her countryman Zorrilla de San Martín. The forms that Del-

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps by influence of the two poets closest to her: Leopoldo Lugones and her compatriot Julio Herrera y Reissig, although Delmira's sonnets are totally different from theirs.



mira prefers are those which were evolved in the 19th century and which were commonplace when she began to write. It is interesting to note the examples, although few, of the use of assonance in the Alexandrine (one in couplets, another in quatrains) because this is one of the forms which becomes current in ultra-modernist poetry. We note also that regular assonant rhyme is used in the first books but disappears in the last—not as a reaction against it, but, rather, to substitute for it the freer and more irregular poetry which we shall now examine.

Delmira Agustini, from the beginning, and with mounting intensity, in different ways attempts metrical forms which tend to break the regularity of the habitual ones which she, simultaneously, employs throughout her life with notable perfection when she so wishes. There are many examples of poems written in regular stanzas which end in a different one; of sonnets which are preceded or followed by a couplet or another capricious excrescence; of the use of consonantal rhyme in compositions which normally would require assonance, and vice versa; of the mixture of monorhymed stanzas with others of alternating rhyme. All this gives the impression of a deliberate intent on the part of the poetess to free herself from the regularities and metrical perfection of the modernist "trend" by which she was formed—a tendency which places Delmira definitely in the post-modernist period.

There is in her a reaction, moreover, against rhyme when she essays, repeatedly, the blank hendecasyllable, regular (LB,<sup>1</sup> "Rebelión"; CM, "Primavera") or combined with verses of seven syllables (LB, "Nardos"; CV, "Plegaria") or with those of seven, of fourteen, and of three (CV, "Visión"). In her poem "Rebelión", of her first book *El libro blanco* (1907), she already expresses, very consciously, this spirit of rebellion against the tyranny of rhyme—which, nonetheless, she employed in the greater part of her poems—and her desire for liberty:

*La rima es el tirano empurpurado,  
Es el estigma del esclavo, el grillo  
Que acongoja la marcha de la Idea.  
No aleguéis que es de oro! El Pensamiento  
No se esclaviza a un vil cascabeleo!  
Ha de ser libre .....  
.....¿Acaso importa  
Que adorne el ala lo que oprime el vuelo?  
.....  
Para morir como su ley impone  
El mar no quiere diques, quiere playas!  
Así la Idea cuando surca el verso  
Quiere al final de la ardua galería,  
Más que una puerta de cristal o de oro  
La pampa abierta que le grita "¡Libre!" (II, 45)*

<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations will be used in referring to Delmira Agustini's books: LB: *El libro blanco*; CM: *Cantos de la mañana*; CV: *Los cálices vacíos*; P: Posthumous poems.

This desire for liberty, however, is manifest, more than in the suppression of the rhyme, in the frequency of irregular rhyme schemes, like those we have indicated in poems of regular versification. There are other poems of even greater irregularity. Thus, for example, "La canción del mendigo" of *La alborada* begins as a regular *romance* in Alexandrines, with some verses of seven syllables, and ends in Alexandrines with perfect or consonantal rhyme. In "La siembra" (*El libro blanco*), consonant and assonant rhymes are used in regular stanzas of verses of 12 syllables: abbc-deec; and in "De mi numen a la muerte" (of the same book) we see Alexandrines in consonantal rhyme mixed with some verses of seven, three, and ten syllables. In her posthumous poems we see "Mis amores" with assonant rhyme (e-o) in the even lines, but combining freely verses of fourteen, seven and four; "Serpentina" with variable consonantal rhyme, in verses of eleven and seven syllables.

All these poems show notable irregularities and liberties in the use of the metrical forms which constituted the poetic world of Delmira and of her period; but one cannot say that they imply an attempt to create new rhythms foreign to the nature of the accustomed ones, but, rather, to combine them with greater freedom and flexibility. There are other poems, which begin in *Cantos de la mañana* (1910),—the most personal and characteristic that she wrote—in which the absence of rhyme, in some, and the liberty in the combination of the verses and rhythms in all, make them worthy of being considered an original attempt at free versification.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth noting that in these later compositions, which we consider the most characteristic and original of Delmira Agustini's, the novelty consists in the free combination of verse and rhyme, the basis of it all being the Alexandrine and the hendecasyllable; that is, the verse forms that she uses most in her regular compositions. There are, in this, similarities and coincidences with some of the free verse of the last period of Rubén Darío, when he himself reacted against his own Modernism, or carried it further along. What, on the other hand, Delmia never follows is the procedure—so common during Modernism—of using metrical variety in verses formed

<sup>1</sup> Let us describe these poems briefly: CM "Vida!" (Without rhyme, on the basis of Alexandrines, with verses of seven, eleven and three syllables); "Las alas" (Without rhyme, on the basis of Alexandrines and hendecasyllables, with verses of seven and three); "Un alma" (Without rhyme, on the basis of hendecasyllables, with verses of seven and one of two); CV "Nocturno" (Without rhyme, on the basis of Alexandrines, with verses of seven and three); "Oh, tú" (Irregular assonant rhyme, on the basis of Alexandrines, with verses of seven and one of ten); "Para tus manos" (Assonant rhyme in even lines—*romance* of eight, of eleven and seven, of eight, quatrains in Alexandrines, quatrains of eight); "A los lejos" (Irregular consonantal rhyme; hendecasyllables, Alexandrines and a verse of seven); P, "El rosario de Eros" (Consonantal rhyme. Alexandrines: one couplet, two stanzas aab-cbb. Refrain of three verses of seven, eleven and seven, the first and third rhyming.—Hendecasyllables: a couplet; hendecasyllables and heptasyllables. Refrain.—Alexandrines. Refrain.—Alexandrines and a heptasyllable. Refrain.—Alexandrines and heptasyllables). "Diario espiritual" (Consonantal rhyme, several stanzas in verses of seven and eleven; at the end it changes to Alexandrines. Between the stanzas a refrain that repeats the first verse of the previous stanza and rhymes with the last).

by the addition of the same foot of three or four syllables, like those of José Asunción Silva, Santos Chocano, or Rubén Darío himself. Delmira Agustini's innovations, like those of the Rubén Darío of the last period, are the ones which the new ultra-modernist generations adopted and carried forward. We believe that Delmira achieved them independently, and by her own originality, and that because of that, although she was a product of Modernism, she should be considered an independent poet and a precursor of the new generations.



## CRITICAL EVALUATION

After analyzing the poetry of Delmira Agustini and breaking it up into its elements of content and expression, we shall now attempt to reconstruct the unity of her poetic personality and determine, insofar as it is possible, her originality and the value of her work. As in the case of all true poets, this is a difficult problem—perhaps because it is so evident. The poetry of Delmira Agustini is an extraordinary case of pure creation in which the innermost thoughts and feelings of a woman who identifies herself with the universe find expression. Therefrom are born her unity, which is interior and subconscious, and her value, which has true and universal significance. Delmira's brief poetic work—brief in point of time, and in production—was the scintillation of a solitary adolescent soul that glowed with its own unmistakable light from the beginning, and that rapidly grew into a flame in which the poetess burned and consumed herself during her brief youth. She—the woman—and her poetry are one and the same thing, with a perfect correspondence between the creator and the creation. All of the exterior world—real or literary—which penetrated her soul and her poetry is fused and transfigured in the interior flame which sprang from her most recondite subconsciousness.

Delmira, however, was conscious of this identity between her being and her poetry, which was the object and only aspiration of her life. The events of her brief biography that she was not able to correlate with this poetic aspiration (of which, perhaps, the outstanding example was her marriage), were anomalous and irrational, and resulted in a tragedy—an absurd tragedy from an objective point of view, but perfectly logical and necessary from that of the subjective world of her poetic creation. Already in the first poem which she published in 1902, "¡Poesía!", she expresses this aspiration which was to be that of her entire life. In another early poem, "Ave de luz," she invokes Genius and offers her illusions, her dreams, her entire youth for one gleaming spark of its wondrous light. Immature though they are, these poems, along with others like "La Fantasía," "Artistas," "Evocación," "El arte," "Jirón de púrpura," "Al vuelo," "La musa gris," "Iniciación," evince, nevertheless, one constant thought, one constant preoccupation: her art. Far better are those she included in *El libro blanco* ("El poeta leva el ancla," "Por campos de ensueño," "Rebelión," "La sed," "Racha de cumbres," "El hada color de rosa," "La musa," "Mi musa triste").

Poetry to her meant freedom—freedom of spirit, of thought, of form, of expression. And so in the already quoted "Rebelión" against rhyme, that "purple-clad tyrant," that "chain that stays the steady march of the idea", she ardently espouses the cause of thought. Rather than a door

of crystal or of gold to hold it in check, it wants the open pampa with its stirring cry of "Free"! for "thought cannot be a slave to a vile jingling." It must be free to scale the heights, pure as a god, its mane awry, with forehead to the sun and to the wind. Why keep its mighty hands in bond—for lesser things—when free they're made to harvest stars, divert the mountains and grasp thunderbolts?

She strove to prove this in countless poems where her verse, untrammelled by the restricting forces of rhyme and form, flowed freely to express what was within her; for "the strings of the lyre are fibres of the soul," and hers, as she said with all exactitude, fit more aptly in a verse than in a universe:

*Alma que cabe en un verso  
Mejor que en un universo (I, 91)*

She frequently expressed her literary ideas—especially during the early stages of her career. Later, when her aspirations became realizations, the theories were cast aside and only her work remained as an expression of her esthetic principles. Likewise, in her first works one can see more clearly the influences that guided her in her poetic formation, and through which she found her originality; when this reached its plenitude, the influences were absorbed by it and were patent only in cursory and inconsequential details. Thus, one can understand why the critics, in trying to determine the sources of her works, agree in concluding that they do not exist; or, if they do, that they are only of secondary importance. Zum Felde, the historian of Uruguayan literature, affirms:<sup>1</sup> "No se encuentran en su poesía elementos ya conocidos ni rastros de otros poetas. Ni en su espíritu, ni en sus motivos, ni en su expresión tiene parecido directo con nadie . . . En Delmira Agustini no se hallan esas influencias, así, de modo concreto". And one of the outstanding Uruguayan poets of the following generation, Emilio Oribe, writes:<sup>2</sup> "Las influencias de las lecturas o estudio en Delmira Agustini fueron externas e insignificantes y se revelan en algunos giros o vocablos sin mayor valor, que se caen del resto de su obra". On the other hand, the Spanish critic, Enrique Díez-Canedo, seems to give greater importance to the influences when he says:<sup>3</sup> "Hay en sus versos demasiado vocabulario modernista: abundan los *bulbules*, para no citar más que un ejemplo, de abolengo rubendariesco; modos de expresión, formas rítmicas del tiempo, antes que suyas". But he adds: "Pero se emancipa en sus momentos mejores. Desde el primer libro se advierte una seguridad en la palabra, que no pierde nunca. Llega luego a una libertad de verso que es trasunto de su alma propia". With other words the Spanish critic affirms the essential originality of Delmira, which Oribe called her

<sup>1</sup> *Proceso intelectual del Uruguay*, 1930, II, p. 230-231.

<sup>2</sup> *Historia sintética de la literatura uruguaya*, 1931, II.

<sup>3</sup> "Letras de América. Poetisas. II", in *España*, Madrid, January 27, 1923.

"lirismo auténtico". The Uruguayan critics were not unaware of, nor did they deny, the existence of influences, above all modernist ones, in the work of Delmira—influences which we ourselves have referred to in speaking of her style. Zum Felde attenuated his previous affirmation with the following: "Su modalidad se halla comprendida, sin embargo, y de un modo general, dentro de la psicología literaria de la época"; that is, "aquel estado de alma *decadente*, propio de las artes y de las letras occidentales, en los últimos lustros del XIX y principios del XX", characterized by "hiperestesia, pesimismo, neurosis, rebeldía individualista, inquietud torturante, perversidad cerebral". And he indicates concretely, even though he calls them "borrosas", the influences of Darío ("influjos paganos"), of d'Annunzio ("por cuyo refinado sensualismo tenía un gran culto"), of Baudelaire and of Poe ("acaso en sus partes sombrías").

Another influence which Zum Felde notes is that of Nietzsche—direct, and through d'Annunzio—to which he ascribes the theme, so frequently sounded in Delmira, of the superhuman race.<sup>1</sup> He had already explained her Nietzscheanism before,<sup>2</sup> saying: "no era un producto libresco . . . había leído a d'Annunzio (al de *El Fuego* especialmente, también influído por Nietzsche). Delmira es nietzscheana no por doctrina sino por espíritu. La lectura de Nietzsche, como la de d'Annunzio, no hicieron sino avivar, nutrir en ella, acaso, su propia intuición dionisiaca. Es el sentido de su poesía lo nietzscheano . . .". Salaverri confirms<sup>3</sup> that at sixteen, when she began to write, she had a fervent artistic devotion for Gabriele d'Annunzio; and Suárez Calimano<sup>4</sup> also mentions it as a "dissolvent" influence that made her wish to be "una *super-mujer* colocada más allá del bien y del mal".

In order to determine the character and manner of this influence we believe we ought to establish the connection between Delmira and other authors closer to her, like those of her own country. The influence of Nietzsche in the period was world-wide and was felt in Uruguay, perhaps, with greater force than in any other country of Spanish America. It is manifest in the novels of Carlos Reyles, and in the poetry of Alvaro Armando Vasseur and of María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira. We find in the latter poetess a like predilection for Delmira's favored theme of the "estirpe suprema" and the Superman:

*Yo quiero un vencedor de toda cosa,  
Invulnerable, universal, sapiente,  
Inaccesible y único . . .*

("Heroica")

<sup>1</sup> See p. 100.

<sup>2</sup> "Homenaje a Delmira Agustini", in *Repertorio Americano*, San José, Costa Rica, March 2, 1929.

<sup>3</sup> In Delmira's *Obras completas*, I, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> "El narcisismo en la poesía femenina de Hispano-América", in *Nosotros*, Buenos Aires, 1931, LXXII, p. 40.



In "Holocausto" she is prepared to yield if the lover is strong:

*Me volveré paloma si tu soberbia siente  
La garra vencedora del águila potente;  
Si sabes ser fecundo seré tu floración,  
Y brotaré una selva de cósmicas entrañas  
Cuyas salvajes frondas románticas y hurañas  
Conquistará tu imperio si sabes ser león.*

She also aspired to the superhuman:

*Con sedes y ambiciones sobrehumanas,  
Con deseos profundos e imposibles.*

But María Eugenia,<sup>1</sup> like Delmira Agustini, was under the influence of another Uruguayan poet, Alvaro Armando Vasseur,<sup>2</sup> who was, according to Salaverri,<sup>3</sup> one of the "admiraciones hondas" of Delmira. In Vasseur's *Cantos del Nuevo Mundo*, we also find the theme of the Superman, with very similar wording:

*¿Quién pudiera fundiros [carne y alma]  
En una sola estatua,  
Sensitiva y parlante,  
Jovial y sobrehumana? (p. 65).*

<sup>1</sup> Besides the theme of the Superman, she also has in common with Delmira those of night and tears ("Cuando en la noche profunda/se llora sin tener causa"), and of statues:

*Yo no sé en qué fantástica materia  
Al escultor de la progeñe humana  
Le plugo modelar la estatua mía  
Que no ablanda la luz de las auroras  
Ni el oscuro crepúsculo marchita.*

Vaz Ferreira, "Canto verbal".

*He de volver a ti, propicia tierra,  
Como una vez surgi de tus entrañas,  
Con un sacro dolor de carne viva  
Y la pasividad de las estatuas.*

Vaz Ferreira, "El regreso".

*Y del mármol hostil de mi escultura  
Brotó un sereno manantial de llanto! . . .  
Y a ese primer llanto: mi alma,  
Una suprema estatua . . .*

Agustini, II, 20

*Yo, la estatua de mármol, con cabeza de fuego . . .*

Agustini, I, 21.

The repeated allusion, in both, to the tragic combination of that "dolor de carne viva" and the "pasividad de las estatuas" which make up their being; to the "fuego" and "mármol" that, as we have said, was the projected title of María Eugenia's only book, and which Delmira also uses in the example given above, recalls Darío's:

*En mi jardín se vió una estatua bella;  
Se juzgó mármol y era carne viva.*

(Cantos de vida y esperanza)

<sup>2</sup> Her estimate of both Vasseur and Delmira can best be judged by her own words, as recorded by the Brazilian critic, Sylvio Julio: "O maior poeta da minha terra é Alvaro Armando Vasseur . . . No Uruguay houve duas poetisas: em primeiro lugar, Delmira Agustini; em segundo lugar, eu". (*Idéas e combates*, Rio de Janeiro, 1927, p. 39).

<sup>3</sup> Delmira Agustini, *Obras completas*, I, p. 14.

*Para engendrar una estirpe  
De libertadores férreos  
Con almas de iconoclastas  
Y tesón de misioneros* (p. 87)

*Trocándose en superbombres* (p. 95)

*Ya la tiniebla sideral clarea  
Auspiciando una estirpe de titanes* (p. 133)

*. . . Claudican mis sueños rojos  
De superhumanidad* (p. 216)

*"Los dioses ya no existen", cada cual lo es de sí;  
Si te juzgas consciente, debes creerlo así.*

*Somos los sobrehumanos, las gemas de las gemas,  
Supremos reflectores de las razas supremas;*

*Yo soy el eccehomo coronado de espinas;  
Sé tú la cruz corpórea que sustente mis ruinas;*

*El saber me hizo Dios: soy mi divinidad,  
Mi orgullo, mi esperanza, mi fe, mi libertad;*

*Mas si en verdad no sientes nostalgias sobrehumanas  
Olvidame, mujer, torna con tus hermanas* (p. 71)

*¡Cuántas veces he soñando  
En una prole inmortal!* (p. 28)

*¿Por qué no me infundiste un alma sobrehumana ?* (p. 49).

*La superhumanidad  
¿No merece un cataclismo?* (p. 59)

And in another great Uruguayan poet, Julio Herrera y Reissig, one can also see lighter traces of the same theme:

*. . . y un ungüento  
De sobrehumanas dulzuras* (OC,<sup>1</sup> II, p. 14)

*Del placer ultraterrestre . . .* (Ibid., p. 15)

*Y betacombes de olímpicas bravuras* (Ibid., p. 109)

*. . . y eran las blancas filarmónicas  
Arañas augurales de un mundo sobrehumano* (OC, IV, p. 76)

We believe that, as in this, we could determine in other themes the relation and affinity between Delmira and these poets, as well as her kinship with others of her country and of her language. She, undoubtedly, also knew the outstanding European writers directly, especially the French, as attested by her friend Badet and by her own work. But these foreign influences and readings were common patrimony then, and all the

<sup>1</sup> *Obras completas*, Montevideo, 1913, 5 vols.

Modernists had long since imbibed and assimilated them in greater variety and abundance, certainly, than could a young woman like Delmira in so short a formative period and so brief a life span. It is evident, moreover, that Delmira, having begun her literary career twenty years after the birth of Modernism—that is, after the search for and attainment of all innovations and *foreignisms*—belongs, rather, to the reaction against all this, which gives rise to the new period known as “post-modernismo,” and which is characterized by its trend towards sincerity and simplicity, and by a purer and more authentic lyricism. It is unquestionable that Delmira makes no effort to imitate the poets she knew and loved. She prefers to be herself; to give what she has within her. For that reason she makes no attempt, either, to rid herself of the traces that the poetry of the day had left on her work—the poetry by which she had been formed and whose characteristics she had so spontaneously and artlessly assimilated. Her originality, therefore, does not consist in shrinking away from that which she had received, and in following new schools of style and expression, but in the fact that she looked within to find the expression of her innermost self.

This explains why one always discerns in her work an element of originality, and a personal tone irreducible to any one or distinct influence, and, at the same time, elements of expression analogous and similar to those commonly used in the poetry of her time—both in Spanish and in other languages—especially in the manner in which they were used by poets who had been closest to her since childhood. Apart from the influence of Rubén Darío, to which we have repeatedly alluded in speaking of her themes and of her style, and which is but partial in character (for the area of Darío’s ways of expression is far vaster and more varied than Delmira’s); we have also pointed out her even greater similarity to some of the authors who wrote before Modernism and who are generally called the precursors of that movement. These authors, Mexican, like Gutiérrez Nájera and Salvador Díaz Mirón; or Cuban, like José Martí, were widely read throughout Spanish America because of the wide-spread publication of their poems in newspapers and literary reviews. There is in Delmira the visible influence of the typical quatrains of the Díaz Mirón of the first period, and we believe that there is, also, that of the blank hendecasyllables of José Martí; and the framework of her versification coincides more with Gutiérrez Nájera’s than with that of any other poet. From him also, rather than from her countryman Zorrilla de San Martín, she probably received the Becquerian forms of her assonant verse. One may say, then, that Delmira goes a step backward in respect to Modernism, and, at the same time, a step forward with her own innovations.

She undoubtedly read the Spanish American poets of the following generation—those properly called *Modernistas*—and with some, like Amado Nervo, she has more in common than with others. But the ones



that seem to have exerted a greater influence on her are the contemporary poets of her own country: Alvaro Armando Vasseur, María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira and Julio Herrera y Reissig, as well as the Argentinian Leopoldo Lugones of the first period. Of all these, Vasseur is the one who seems to have had the most profound influence on Delmira. He is a strange poet, influenced by Poe, Nietzsche and Whitman. His dominant notes are a marked interest in psychological abnormality, in mystery and in the sub-conscious, as well as a concern for social reform. (This last does not interest Delmira).

All these themes are found in the first works of Vasseur (*Cantos augurales*, 1904; *Cantos del Nuevo Mundo*, 1906 and *Cantos del otro yo*, 1909). Like the Nietzschean theme of the Superman, of which we have spoken, we find in Vasseur much of the favorite vocabulary of Delmira (*Luzbel*, *Ananké*, *natura*, *bulbules*, *Selene*, *olímpicas*, *oriflamas*, *estirpe*, *prole*, *aurisolar*, *perfil*, *pedrería*, *inaccesible*, *cármenes*, *glisar*, *lis*, *insomnio*, *abismo*, *constelación*, *misterio*, *crisoles*, *augusto*, *gemas*, *numen*, *augural*, *egregio*, *quimera*, *fúlgido*); similar stylistic procedure (the successive use of *porque*); and frequent use of common images:

*Como inmortales faros velan la vida mía  
Tus ojos que atesoran toda la luz del día,  
Los combiantes del iris y el misterio del mar*  
Vasseur, CNM,<sup>1</sup> p. 39

*Jardines de los iris! . . .  
Fondos marinos . . .  
Faros que apuntan misteriosas rutas*  
Agustini, I, 58

*Quiero grabar tu lírica hermosura  
En el diamante negro de mi estilo*  
Vasseur, CNM, p. 67

*En oro, bronce o acero  
Líricos grabar yo quiero  
Tu wagneriano perfil*  
Agustini, I, 60

*Tus manos fueron hechas con polvo de diamantes*  
Vasseur, CNM, p. 193

*Con filamentos de astros y polvos de diamantes  
Labra su bello nido . . .*  
Agustini, II, 115

*El broche de tu boca*  
Vasseur, CNM, p. 184

<sup>1</sup> *Cantos del Nuevo Mundo*, Valencia, 1910 [Under the title of his second book, Vasseur published his, until then, complete works in this volume].

. . . tu boca!  
*Dos pétalos de rosa abrochando un abismo*  
 Agustini, I, 54

The influence on Delmira of the greatest poet of Uruguay, her contemporary Julio Herrera y Reissig (1875-1910), is not as profound as that of Alvaro Armando Vasseur for it does not affect the cardinal themes of her poetry. But it is the most important and extensive as regards her poetic expression. In spite of the marked differences that exist between Herrera y Reissig and Delmira—the two purest and most original poets of Uruguay—there is a deep similarity between them in the esthetic sense, because of their pure lyric quality and because both, each one in his own way, create in their poetry a harmonious and closed world which is above reality and which has little or nothing to do with it. They are two poets who, in a sense, forecast Surrealism and "pure poetry" which in Hispanic letters proceed in great measure from them.

Herrera y Reissig wrote the greater and best part of his work in sonnet form, and, as we have seen, this is also the strophic form that Delmira preferred. And, although as we have already said, Delmira's sonnets differ essentially from those of Herrera y Reissig, both in tone and inspiration, there are, however, some ("Fué al pasar" and "Tú dormías" of *Cantos de la mañana*, and "El arroyo" of her posthumous poems) which reproduce in so great a measure the tone of those of Herrera that one can consider them works of imitation. From Herrera y Reissig too, probably—although they are common to all Modernists—proceed certain characteristic traits of the style of Delmira, such as the excessive use of words in "esdrújulo"<sup>1</sup> (*hipnótica, olímpica, sonámbulo, luzbérico, eléctrica, extática, etc.*)—many of them "learned" or technical; the formation of verbs like *viborear, misteriar, clarar, corolar*; certain verbal uses such as:

*Yo sonroso, tu nievas* (I, 53)

*Sonrosan rosas* (I, 31)

*Una lanza de amor en tu brazo sonrosa* (I, 40)

*Yo desmayo a tu hechizo* (I, 98)

*Que vibre, y desmaye, y llore* (II, 51)

*Sus dos brazos abrieron armoniosos* (II, 33)

*Como una flor . . .*

*Yo abriré dulcemente para ti* (I, 79)

*Mi corazón . . .*

*Hoy abre en luz como una flor . . .* (I, 81)

<sup>1</sup> Words of more than two syllables, the last two of which are short.

*Y bendigo la noche . . .  
Que floreció en mi vida  
Tu boca . . .* (II, 82)

much of her modernist vocabulary, and certain images and expressions used by both such as

"el abanico":

*Despliega el iluminado  
Abanico de tu risa!*

Herrera y Reissig, OCV, 36

*. . . siempre que yo quería  
El abanico de oro de tu risa se abría*  
Agustini, II, 34

"el hongo":

*Con la expresión estúpida de un hongo  
Clavada en la ignorancia de la noche  
Muere la luna . . .*

Herrera y Reissig, OC, IV, 85

[*Selene*] *Máscara del misterio o de la soledad  
Clavada como un hongo sobre la inmensidad*  
Agustini, I, 44

"cabellera muerta":

*Al contemplar tu cabellera muerta*

Herrera y Reissig, *Poesías completas*, p. 203.

*. . . las abiertas  
Cortinas dicen cabelleras muertas*  
Agustini, I, 22

"viuda":

*Vistió la tarde soñadoras tintas  
A modo de romántica viuda*

Herrera y Reissig, *Poesías completas*, p. 209

*Las nubes negras pasaron  
Como viudas lacrimosas*

Herrera y Reissig, OC, IV, 104

*La noche en la montaña mira con ojos viudos*

Herrera y Reissig, *Los peregrinos de piedra*, [1923], p. 42

*Fuera la noche en veste de tragedia solloza  
Como una enorme viuda . . .*

Agustini, I, 52

"ojeras":

*La senda en flor de tus ojeras lilas*

Herrera y Reissig, *Los peregrinos de piedra*, p. 15



*Lilas, violadas, lóbregas, mudables como ojeras*  
*Las rutas . . .*

Herrera y Reissig, *Ibid.*, p. 48

*La tarde . . .*  
*Se ha dormido en tus ojeras*

Herrera y Reissig, OC, III, 20

*La tarde . . .*  
*Ha pintado en tus ojeras*  
*Un vago jardín de lilas*

Herrera y Reissig, OC, III, 22

*Y arden en su halo espectral de heliotropo*  
*Sus clementes ojeras otoñales de luna*

Herrera y Reissig, OC, II, 142

*Y las sendas sombrías*  
*De tus ojeras . . .*

Agustini, II, 30

*Las ojeras que ahondamos la tarde y yo . . .*

Agustini, I, 27

*Horizontes violados sus ojeras*

Agustini, II, 70

*Crecían las lunas nuevas de tus ojeras*

Agustini, I, 88

*Abondas los cauces de amatista*  
*De las ojeras cárdenas*

Agustini, II, 75

"lamer":

*Y su piedad humilde lame como una vaca*

Herrera y Reissig, *Los peregrinos de piedra*, p. 38

*Y la noche . . . lame sus mansedumbres*

Herrera y Reissig, *Ibid.*, p. 96

*La Miseria lamía su mano*

Agustini, II, 43

"el espejo":

*La armoniosa cabeza . . .*

*Como en un claro espejo, la contempla en el alma*

Herrera y Reissig, OC, II, 40

*Cante mi amor, tu soledad y piensa*  
*Que bajo el sol de su mirada inmensa*  
*Mi alma la espeja como un agua pura*

Herrera y Reissig, OC, III, 9

*En el silencio de la noche mi alma*  
*Llega a la tuya como a un gran espejo*

Agustini, II, 78

One might also establish analogies with the Lugones of *Las montañas del oro* (1897) and *Los crepúsculos del jardín* (1905), although it would be difficult to distinguish them from those made with Herrera y Reissig because of the many similarities between those two poets during that period of their production. Likewise, it is useless to cite other analogies with Rubén Darío, besides those mentioned in speaking of her themes and style, because they are the same as those she has with Vasseur and Herrera y Reissig, and also because they constitute the general common ground of Modernism, which colors Delmira's poetry but which does not explain her originality. All these authors, moreover, make an effort to bring to Spanish American poetry the French influence of Baudelaire, Verlaine, Banville, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Samain, as well as that of Poe and Whitman and all the others who gave the poetry of the Modernists its universal and cosmopolitan character. It would be difficult to determine, therefore, whether the visible influence of these authors on the poetry of Delmira is direct or indirect. We are told she admired Rostand (to whom she at times refers), Maeterlinck, d'Annunzio . . . All this—that which she knew directly, and that which reached her through the Modernists—is fused in Delmira, and works in her poetry in a spontaneous and subconscious manner. Of all these foreign influences—so diverse—we believe that the one which left the deepest traces in the essential aspects of Delmira's poetry is that of Baudelaire.

Delmira Agustini, in a manner, belongs to the Baudelairean caste of damned and satanic<sup>1</sup> poets:

*Satán pudiera ser mi semilla o mi flor!*

*Soy fruto de aspereza y maldición: yo amargo  
Y mancho mortalmente el labio que me toca;  
Mi beso es flor sombría de un Otoño muy largo . . .  
Exprimido en tus labios dará un sabor amargo  
Y todo el Mal del Mundo florecerá<sup>2</sup> en tu boca.*

"Supremo idilio", I, 97

The contrasts characteristic of Delmira's style and of her poetic concept of the universe—between tears and laughter, heaven and hell, sunset and

<sup>1</sup> She probably was also familiar with Vasseur's version of "Les Litanies de Satan" which appeared in his *Cantos del Nuevo Mundo*.

<sup>2</sup> This image of Delmira's was taken bodily from *Les Fleurs du Mal*, as were Herrera y Reissig's:

*Ojos en cuyas ojeras  
Amor esbozó un violado  
Jardín del Mal . . .*

(OC, V, 48)

and Lugones':

*I aperecieron dos ojeras tristes  
Como flores del Mal bajo tus párpados . . .  
(Las montañas del oro, 1919).*

dawn, the stars and the abyss, God and Satan, grandeur and baseness—are of Baudelairean origin. The following are some examples:

Baudelaire:<sup>1</sup>

*Et jamais je ne pleure et jamais je ne ris* (p. 37)

*Viens-tu du ciel profond ou sors-tu de l'abîme,  
O Beauté? ton regard, infernal et divin . . .*

.....

*Tu contiens dans ton oeil le couchant et l'aurore;*

.....

*Sors-tu du gouffre noir ou descends-tu des astres?*

.....

*De Satan ou de Dieu, qu'importe? Ange ou Sirène . . .* (p. 44-45)

*O fangeuse grandeur! sublime ignominie!* (p. 50)

Delmira:

*Y esperarás sonriendo y esperarás llorando* (I, 34)

*Si se durmió llorando, que al despertar sonría* (I, 40)

..... *una escala de oro*

*Que asciende del abismo y descende del cielo* (I, 47)

*Porque sobre el Espacio te diviso* [Eros]

*Puente de luz, perfume y melodía,*

*Comunicando infierno y paraíso* (I, 51)

[Amor]

*Raíz nutrida en la entraña del Cielo y del Averno* (I, 100)

[Boca] . . . *ánfora viviente*

*Donde brindan delicias y delirios*

*Fresas de Aurora en vino de Poniente* (I, 43)

*Cuando clava el divino monstruo de su belleza* (I, 47)

*Si hay en Luzbel emanación divina*

*En ti hay vislumbre de infernal nobleza* (II, 86)

The feeling for the abysmal and the profound, expressed by the image of the bed or couch (or their appurtenances), which we analyzed in Delmira,<sup>2</sup> is also characteristic of Baudelaire:

*Rien ne me vaut l'abîme de la couche* (p. 62)

..... *divans profonds comme des tombeaux* (p. 257)

Delmira had said:

*Cojinas de abismo* (I, 25)

<sup>1</sup>*Les Fleurs du Mal*, Paris, Payot, 1926.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 135.



*Honda y narcótica almohada de la muerte* (I, 47)

*En tu almohada trágica y honda como una sima* (I, 98)

... las hondas almohadas  
*Plintos del Sueño y del Misterio gradas* (I, 22)

... terciopelos profundos (II, 23)

... felpas profundas (II, 27)

Many other themes and images are common to both poets, as, for example, that of eating or biting hearts,<sup>1</sup> and that "vampiric" hunger that obsessed them. Baudelaire says:

*Ne cherchez plus mon coeur; les bêtes l'ont mangé* (p. 106)

*Je suis de mon coeur le vampire* (p. 144)

*Pour exercer tes dents à ce jeu singulier,  
 Il te faut chaque jour un coeur au râtelier* (p. 50)

... *Le Temps mange la vie,  
 El l'obscur Ennemi qui nous ronge le coeur  
 Du sang que nous perdons croît et se fortifie!* (p. 28)

... *cuisinier aux appétits funèbres,  
 Je fais bouillir et je mange mon coeur* (p. 72)

and Delmira:

*Fiera de amor, yo sufro hambre de corazones . . .*

.....

*No hay manjar que más tiente, no hay más grato sabor . . .*

.....

*Y desde entonces muerdo soñando un corazón* (I, 73)

*Traga siniestro buitre mi pobre corazón* (I, 98)

It is important to attempt to determine now whether Delmira Agustini's poetry has, as one might be led to expect, greater relation to the feminine poetry which before her appearance and during her lifetime had a new and extraordinary development in France.<sup>2</sup> Of the hundreds of poetesses which this movement produced, some must surely have been read in Spanish America. The Comtesse de Noailles—in whose

<sup>1</sup> Darío, in his "Canción de otoño en primavera," had said:

*Otra juzgó que era mi boca  
 El estuche de su pasión,  
 Y que me roería, loca,  
 Con sus dientes el corazón.*

and Alfonsina Storni:

... *si pudiera  
 Bajo los cielos negros te comiera  
 El corazón con dientes de leona.*

<sup>2</sup> See Clarissa Burnham Cooper, *Women Poets of the Twentieth Century in France. A Critical Bibliography*, New York, Kings Crown Press, 1943.

work and example, it has been said, this new feminine poetry had its origin—was undoubtedly known there. We believe that the French poetess had considerable influence on the Spanish American women poets—mainly in their decision to express their intimate selves in writing, especially in reference to love. But Delmira Agustini, as well as the other important poetesses who came after her, carried the example to the last extreme and expressed, with marked sincerity, their most recondite thoughts, emotions and feelings. And, as each, in expressing what was within her, differed from the other, even more did she differ from Anna de Noailles. The only one who, as we shall see later, has significant psychic and expressive affinities with her is Juana de Ibarbourou.

As for Delmira, she, as we have shown, had but the most cursory concern for the "attending glory" of nature for which Anna de Noailles—who carried the odor of the seasons in her hands, the taste of sky and wind in her mouth, and who longed to breathe, to touch and *bite* the beauty of the morning—had such a fervent cult. There is in her poetry no evocation of the past or of her childhood; no fear of death or of old age; no particular zest for life—themes which appear so repeatedly and persistently in the French poetess. Delmira, moreover, is a poet of muted tones, of twilight, of night and shadows, and of silence. The Comtesse de Noailles—"ivre d'odeur, de soleil et d'azur"—wrote ecstatic paeans to the bright, ardent and sonorous aspects of nature: the sun, the summer, the torrid climes, the day, the water, the birds, the tempests . . . Delmira Agustini's world was a mystic one of fancy and of dreams; Anna de Noailles lived in constant communion with the earth and all its components and realities. They were both sensuous in their way—one (Delmira) with the mind; the other with the body. And love inspired both with voluptuousness—voluptuousness of death in the Uruguayan poetess; voluptuousness of life in the Comtesse.

Delmira, however, had more temperamental and spiritual affinities with another French poetess, Renée Vivien. In their poetry they both sounded the same somber echoes: shadows, death, silence, melancholy, sadness . . . They both sought escape along the "black paths" of night:

*La nuit me fuit toujours magnifique et clémente,  
J'appris d'elle les noirs chemins où l'on peut fuir . . .*

They both liked "le jour mourant qui s'éteint par degrés", "l'intimité claustrale de la chambre", and knew "la volupté divine d'être seul[e]s". In contrast to Anna's almost constant "joie", their poetry knew no laughter—perhaps because they felt that "le sanglot est moins déchirant que le rire". They shared the same predilection for lilies, perhaps because, as Renée said: "Ce sont d'étranges fleurs de mort et de silence . . . ; ce sont des fleurs de mort et de mélancolie" . . . And they both sought "la volupté de la mort" . . . "au fond de la joie infinie" . . .

But Renée Vivien is far more of this world, far more sensual than Delmira, and far more graphic and realistic in her descriptions of the love scenes—scenes of love which in themselves are more daring than those evoked by the author of *Los cálices vacíos* in that they depict the Lesbian passion of those whom Baudelaire called the “femmes damnées”. For she had, as she said:

. . . *l'inexcusable audace de vouloir*  
*Le sororal amour . . .*

Yet, in spite of all these patent, or possible, influences—which she neither sought nor concealed—Delmira Agustini is essentially original, not merely when compared to other women writers, but in relation to poets of any time. And Zum Felde<sup>1</sup> does not hesitate to affirm this originality of hers in these definite and rotund terms:

La originalidad de Delmira Agustini no es sólo en relación al ambiente literario platense o americano sino mundial. Puede afirmarse que, antes de ella, ninguna poetisa había expresado con tan soberbia desnudez y acentos tan categóricos la poesía pasional de su sexo.

The greatest Hispanic critics and poets of the day: Darío, Unamuno, Rueda, Vaz Ferreira, Herrera y Reissig, Reyes, Nervo, etc., were quick to note and recognize the unique value of Delmira's poetry, and were lavish in their praise. The following is the brief, but exact and penetrating judgment expressed by Rubén Darío in 1912:

De todas cuantas mujeres hoy escriben en verso, ninguna ha impresionado tanto mi ánimo como Delmira Agustini por su alma sin velos y su corazón de flor. A veces rosa por lo sonrosado, a veces lirio por lo blanco. Y es la primera vez que en lengua castellana aparece un alma femenina en el orgullo de la verdad de su inocencia y de su amor, a no ser Santa Teresa en su exaltación divina . . . Cambiando la frase de Shakespeare, podría decirse “that is a woman,” pues por ser muy mujer dice cosas exquisitas que nunca se han dicho.

It was with deep and true intuition that he perceived the essence of the originality and the worth of the young Uruguayan poetess, and although his opinion was couched in somewhat cryptic terms, we need but to gloss or amplify it to understand the real significance of the poetry of Delmira Agustini.

The essence and root of her originality consists in being the expression of a woman's soul. And this is so, not because her poetry deals with those experiences and aspects that we consider peculiar to women, but because it is a total and truly feminine vision and interpretation of the universe which differ basically from man's in their sexual root. That is why her poetry “says exquisite things that have never been said”; because in it a woman has succeeded in expressing the unveiled truth about herself, not merely concerning those intimacies which modesty oftentimes

<sup>1</sup> *Proceso* . . . , II, p. 232.



was wont to keep secret—yet which, nonetheless, have been revealed in literature by more cynical men and women—but in a deeper and more universal sense which transcends the individual and the sex to become a new interpretation of the world and of life as felt and expressed by the candid heart of a woman. The novelty of this interpretation lies in the fact that this young woman has succeeded in attuning her heart-beat to that of the universe. And she feels the pride of this discovery and the audacity of expressing it with innocence and candor.

The truth about herself, the deepest reality of her being, is love, which is also the reality of the universe and of men—poets, philosophers—who have arrived at this idea by a process of exaltation, idealization and depuration of its physical, corruptible and perishable elements. But in the poetry of this young woman love is an exclusive and all-absorbing emotion which leaves room for no other, or which is the reason-for-being of all the rest. It appears in her in a spontaneous manner, as a product of her organic physiology. And she never feels ashamed of it, nor sees it as different from her highest spiritual aspirations. Body and soul are an absolute identity in her poetry. The modern poets, notably Rubén Darío, have also looked for the unity of the antithetical aspects of love: the physical and spiritual; but the peculiar thing about Delmira is that for her there is no such antithesis, for both are one and the same thing. This affirmation of pure sexuality as the only reality, and its projection upon the universe, is the true character of the poetry of Delmira Agustini, which, we believe, represents a modality of spirit which is typically feminine.

As Rubén Darío very well noted, this attitude towards herself and towards life reflects a state of the purest innocence, and it has been an error, very common among the more superficial critics, to interpret as sensuality and "eroticism" the expression of physical love that is found throughout all her poems. Luisa Luisi, her countrywoman, has analyzed with perspicacity and understanding this aspect of the work of Delmira in a manner that leaves no room for so erroneous an interpretation. For to call her poems "sensual" is an error similar to that of thinking that the words and images of physical and human love with which Saint Theresa or Saint John of the Cross expressed their love of God were the expression of physiological states. When Rubén Darío compares Delmira with Saint Theresa he does not wish to be irreverent, nor is he confusing the human exaltation of one with the divine exaltation of the other. Other critics have afterwards made the same comparison, like Juana de Ibarbourou who affirms that, in spite of all, Delmira is a mystic. We also believe that Delmira's poetry is of a mystical nature and that, esthetically, it resembles, more than anything else, that of the mystics. It is not like it, naturally, in the religious sense, for precisely one of the most notable aspects of her work is the total absence in it of the Catholic religiousness

which, undoubtedly, she received from her heritage and environment. The references she makes to God and to Christ have nothing to do with conceptual or traditional Christianity. Her profound egoism does not admit the least vestige of Faith, Hope or Charity. For her only god is the vital impulse towards love which palpitates in her innermost being and which drives her blindly and desperately towards death. But she is a mystic because her spiritual life is all internal and transcends her being to encompass the entire universe in an infinite and eternal aspiration which is not satisfied with anything relative or transient. Love to her, as Federico de Onís<sup>1</sup> says, "más bien que el amor es el ansia frenética del amor, que en sus versos es una sensualidad mística, trascendental y sobrehumana, una sensación del mundo a través de la carne y el anhelo sexual".

For that reason her poetry, like that of the mystics, is pure lyricism, for it must of necessity be the expression of inner states of mind and is, therefore, oftentimes ineffable. To express them she must make use of images and create an entire poetic world which, although it may employ exterior elements of reality, has nothing to do with it. Hence the dominant importance which, as we have seen, dreams have in her poetry. As Emilio Oribe said in an essay on the esthetics of Delmira, the material "baggage" of her poetry is almost non-existent and her poems are merely ardent crystallizations of the "substance" of her dreams. Yet the poetic world of pure images which Delmira creates is not turbid or vague like that of the romantic poets, but luminous, plastic and precise like that of the mystics. For that reason some have thought that her poetry was intellectual while, as Luisa Luisi and Emilio Oribe have said, it is wholly intuitive and subconscious. And, according to Federico de Onís,<sup>2</sup> "ha convertido en arte verdadero las oscuridades de su profunda vida instintiva y subconsciente". Hence the value and the modernity of her art.

Delmira aspired to the highest—to completeness—in life, in love, in art, for she felt that all lives were rooted in her being and that she reflected all things (II, 20). She longed to span the full limit of life: with her forehead on the morrow, her foot on yesterday (I, 73), and to see its seeds blossom into a splendid race, clean of imperfections, stalwart in purpose, impervious to the yielding marble of the weak. She pined for superhuman love, greater than life itself, greater than dreams; a love that would be shadowy and radiant, for it was to be shared by one whose eyes were sovereigns of all shadow and of all light, by one from whose hands flowed all the darkness as well as all the stars . . . And nothing short of the Universe was to fit within the boundless expanse of the divine aspirations of her muse—a muse which was to be ever-changing, mysterious and complex, and which sang of things "eternal, infinite,

<sup>1</sup> *Antología de la poesía española e hispanoamericana* (1882-1932), Madrid, 1934, p. 907.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 908.

supreme, vast" as are love, life, death, the soul, destiny, mystery; and the world, the heavens, the horizon, the stars, the earth, the seas, the deserts . . .

And she, who at times felt frightened by the human ("acá lo humano asusta"), inhabited a mystic world of super-realities. She knew "the austere beauty of the temple of the rare," felt magnetically drawn by the lethal lure of mystery, and lived, preferably, "entre largos silencios y penumbras muy suaves". She longed to hold in her grasp "the most distant things—the most inaccessible." And as in dreams—or reverie—she tremblingly crossed the wide, unknown threshold of "el sublime enigma/del *más allá*", she groped for those "misteriosas rutas/caminos temblorosos de una orilla desconocida" . . . that led to those "tierras nunca vistas/de hondas revelaciones, de cosas imprevistas" which her spirit longed to inhabit.

Delmira Agustini lighted the spark which was to become that oft-times scintillating but uncontrollable and towering bonfire which is present-day feminine poetry in Spanish America. For, as Parra del Riego, the compiler of an anthology of women's verse, says, her poetry

. . . causó un efecto de revolución artística en América. Fué el primer espectáculo al aire libre de un corazón de mujer que se vió. Desde entonces las poetisas dejaron de imitar a los hombres y cantaron en mujer y pensaron en mujer.

Among the poetesses who appeared in rapid succession almost immediately after Delmira Agustini, there are three who can be considered her peers: Gabriela Mistral, Alfonsina Storni and Juana de Ibarbourou. These three great writers—to whom we shall devote the last part of this study—undoubtedly received from Delmira the creative urge and impulse that drove them to seek out and to express their own originality, and in all three we find traces of her influence. Juana de Ibarbourou who, temperamentally, is almost the antithesis of Delmira, generously confesses this debt, and voices the veneration they all feel for "the older sister":

. . . esa figura a la vez dulce y sobrehumana que será siempre la más alta, y de la cual venimos todas las que volcamos en el verso el pesado secreto de nuestros corazones.

Delmira Agustini es la santa laica de las mujeres latinas que hacen poesía . . . Como hacia una hermana mayor se vuelven a ella todas las pupilas cargadas de ensueños.

A Delmira se la siente en torno nuestro . . .

Other poetesses, in numerous poems—of which we shall only quote the following of Alfonsina Storni, have repeatedly expressed this cult for Delmira:



## Palabras a Delmira Agustini

*Estás muerta y tu cuerpo, bajo uruguayo manto,  
Descansa de su fuego, se limpia de su llama,  
Sólo desde tus libros tu roja lengua llama,  
Como cuando vivías, al amor y al encanto.*

*Hoy, si un alma de tantas, sentenciosa y oscura,  
Con palabras pesadas va a sangrarte el oído,  
Encogida en tu pobre cajoncito roído  
No puedes contestarle desde tu sepultura.*

*Pero sobre tu pecho, para siempre deshecho,  
Comprensivo vigila, todavía, mi pecho,  
Y, si ofendida lloras por tus cuencas abiertas  
Tus lágrimas heladas, con mano tan liviana  
Que más que mano amiga parece mano hermana,  
Te enjuugo dulcemente las tristes cuencas muertas.*

(Ocre, p. 67)

And María Monvel—herself an outstanding woman poet of a somewhat later period—says in her anthology, *Poetisas de América*:

Su nombre se convirtió en fanal para todas las mujeres que después de ella han manejado el verso. Puede decirse que no hay una sola que de cerca o de lejos, no la haya imitado.

But these three major poetesses—Gabriela, Alfonsina and Juana—comprise, along with Delmira, that illustrious group of the first generation of the new Spanish American women poets. They are four stars of the first magnitude, each one with her own individual and distinct personality, but all tracing—each in her particular way—the intricate and unpredictable patterns of the feminine soul. As a whole they represent the high point of post-modernist poetry, for, as Professor de Onís says in the introduction to his *Antología*:<sup>1</sup> “sólo las mujeres alcanzan en este momento la afirmación plena de su individualidad lírica”.

All the feminine poetic production that follows virtually stems from these four. There are, in the newer poetry, writers of authentic and distinct originality who have paved new literary paths; but perhaps the most important and significant factor of the new period is the enormous development—as regards quantity—of present-day Spanish American feminine poetry. To study it one would have to group a great many of the younger writers around the four major poetesses of the first period, and then form other groups with those who represent the new currents and tendencies of the poetic evolution of recent times. Our work, for the present, is limited to the study of that first period, and will end with the characterization of the three great poetesses who, together with Delmira, head it. We trust that that which they have in common, as well as that in which they differ, will then be clear.

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. xviii.



WOMEN POETS AFTER DELMIRA AGUSTINI





# I

## GABRIELA MISTRAL

The year that so tragically cut short the career of Delmira Agustini—1914—was to introduce to the Spanish American world of letters another poetess of first rank: the Chilean, Gabriela Mistral. Her best known poems, sprung, most of them, from a common fount of pain (the death, by suicide, of her lover), of *Desolation*—as her first book is called—are simpler in form than the tortuous ones of Delmira. But they disclose cavernous depths, and their intensity sounds the very pith of human emotion, especially in those where—as in the somber ones that tell of the lover's self-inflicted death—she speaks of "the ineffable" with bland and almost disconcerting serenity and casualness.

### 1. LIFE AND WORKS

Lucila Godoy Alcayaga—as she was called before she adopted that pseudonym which has now become so famous—was born in the little town of Vicuña, in the fertile and benign valley of Elqui, in 1889. Her father, don Jerónimo Godoy Villanueva, by profession a rural schoolmaster, by vocation a poet of somewhat mediocre talents, left his home—never to return—when Lucila was three years old. Yet, although she had been so early deprived of his "paternal counsel and care," she always harbored for him a deep filial affection born, perhaps, of a certain similarity of interests and a genuine admiration for that "extraordinary man" who "knew too many things" . . .<sup>1</sup>

Among the poems he dedicated to his daughter—and which she remembers "with sweetness and melancholy"—is the following (rather innocuous) cradle-song that might have inspired her to essay that type of composition which is one of her favorites, and in which she has proved so successful:

*Duérmete, Lucila, que el mundo está en calma,  
Ni el cordero brinca ni la oveja bala.  
Duérmete, Lucila, que cuidan de vos  
En tu cuna un ángel, en el cielo Dios.*

*Duérmete, Lucila, ojitos de cielo,  
Mira que tu madre también tiene sueño.  
Ángel de la Guarda, házmela dormir  
Para que a su madre no la haga sufrir.*

<sup>1</sup> These biographical references, and those that follow, were drawn, mostly, from the two books on Gabriela: Virgilio Figueroa, *La divina Gabriela*, Santiago de Chile, 1933; and Raúl Silva Castro, *Estudios sobre Gabriela Mistral*, Santiago de Chile, 1935.

*Angel de la Guarda, cuidame a este lirio  
Que mañana al alba rezará conmigo.  
Duérmete, niñita, duérmete por Dios,  
Que si no te duermes me enojo con vos.*<sup>1</sup>

Her father's bent for "a walking knowledge of geography" left the child Lucila entirely under the care of her mother, doña Petronila Alcayaga, "a very handsome and delicate woman," with a "soft and pathetic voice" (to whom Gabriela dedicated some of her most tender pages), and of her maternal half-sister, Emelina Molina Alcayaga ("mi santa hermana Emelina"), who became a rural schoolteacher about the time Lucila was born. And so the teaching profession that was to become the guiding motive of her life, and the poetic gift that has made her unique in Spanish American letters, were already present, in one form or another, in her immediate family.

She spent the first twelve years of her life among peasants. And she has always maintained a close contact—and spiritual affinity—with these people of the soil. She likes to speak of her "rurality" and of her humble origin: "vengo de campesinos y soy uno de ellos". Her work abounds in rural allusions, and a certain earthiness pervades everything that springs from her pen. Without the benefit of "guidance," and entirely devoid of formal training, this quiet, sensitive and sad child early began to feed her eager mind with random reading. While looking over the scant resources she had at hand, she came upon some poems of her father's—"the first I ever read"—which fired her imagination and started her, at the age of fifteen, upon the literary road she has by now so long and well traversed. Her first compositions were in prose—a mellow prose, well grounded in the long-faltering but still prevalent romantic tradition, and surcharged with "poetic" phrases, with baroque imagery and with sadness. Her poems, which flowed from her dolorous soul almost simultaneously, follow the same stylistic, mental and emotional patterns. These early contributions of Lucila Godoy were published in the local press: *El Coquimbo* and *La Voz de Elqui*.

The sad, the grief-filled note—which in her early compositions seems overworked, and somewhat of a pose—becomes tonic, and characteristic of almost all her poems, for very early in life she knew pain to be "the only reality." In a letter written to a friend when she was about sixteen, she says: "There is something in my being which engenders bitterness; there is a secret hand which filters gall into my heart, even though happiness surrounds me." And the same thought recurs in her first articles and poems which speak of grief as the genial lyre which intones the most sublime of songs.

"Flores negras," written in 1905 for the album of "Lolo," is a typical

<sup>1</sup> Figueroa, *op. cit.*, p. 42.



adolescent poem of disillusionment, anguish, despair, and has little in it to forecast the advent of the great poetess of a decade later:

*Yo no puedo cantar porque no brota  
El verso ya de mi alma entristecida.  
¿Quieres que vibre el harpa que está rota?  
¿Quieres que cante el alma que está herida?*

*Ya no es el tiempo que el papel dejaba  
Un reguero de esencias y de amor,  
Cuando en mis pobres versos derramaba  
Las hojas de la flor de mi ilusión.*

*Murió la inspiración, tan sólo el llanto  
Lleva a mi alma la miel del sentimiento,  
Y, si llega a entonar un triste canto,  
Es aquel del sollozo y del lamento.*

.....

*Yo que tan sólo sé llorar, no dejo  
Sino flores marchitas en mi senda,  
Y mis canciones, de dolor reflejo,  
¿Podrán, dime, formarte alguna ofrenda?*

*Otoño, ruina, angustias y cenizas  
Son los sueños que viven en mi mente.  
¿Los juncos mil? Se los llevó la brisa,  
¿La idea? Se agotó como una fuente.*

*Por eso pido que jamás repases,  
Estas estrofas que son flores negras,  
Sin perfume, sin vida, porque nacen  
En el valle otoñal de mi alma enferma.<sup>1</sup>*

Gabriela wisely eliminated these early puerile efforts (which were born "in the autumnal valley" of her "sick soul") from her books, and gave for publication only those that did not mar the general superior tone of her work.

But Gabriela Mistral is not exclusively a writer. She is, above all, a teacher<sup>2</sup>—"the rural teacher" personified. She was only fifteen when, entirely untaught, she began her didactic career which was to terminate some twenty years later when she was given a pension by the Chilean government in recognition of her work at home and abroad. She started as an assistant in a rural school in La Compañía (Coquimbo) and later became a teacher in several of the primary schools in near-by provinces and towns. About 1908 she sought admittance to the Normal School of La Serena. But the opposition was strong. Because of her writings and strange ways (she "smoked a great deal" and was, moreover, adjudged

<sup>1</sup> Figueroa, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> . . . la enseñanza es mi preocupación . . . la primaria se lleva mis preferencias." (*Ibid.*, p. 145.)

a girl "with pagan ideas"), she was considered somewhat of a radical. Some three years later, however, in spite of her continued lack of formal training—and through the intercession of her good friend, the future president of Chile, don Pedro Aguirre Cerda—she was considered eligible to teach in the secondary schools. In this capacity she served, with distinction, in the Liceos of Traiguén, Antofagasta and Los Andes. Seven years later she was made Director of the Liceo of Punta Arenas (1918-1920), and then of those of Temuco (1920-1921) and Santiago (1921-1922).

It was at the beginning of this spectacular rise, at Coquimbo, that Lucila met Romelio Ureta, the young man who was so tragically responsible for the flowering and crystallization of her great literary career. He was a handsome railroad employee. It is said that, through no fault of his own—to help "a friend in need"—he was prompted to "borrow" some of the company's funds with the intent of returning them. But it evolved into the familiar story: unable to replace the amount before the "borrowing" could be detected, and abandoned in his plight by his "friend," he sought escape in suicide—"shattering his temples like delicate glass." The echo of that shot—says Soiza Reilly<sup>1</sup>—was "Gabriela Mistral" . . .

In 1914, five years later, a poetic tournament was to take place in Santiago—undoubtedly to stimulate the somewhat stagnant Chilean poetic talent. Aspiring poets sent their contributions from all parts of the country. But the first prize was awarded to a timid rural school teacher for her powerful and stirring "Sonnets of Death." With characteristic modesty she refused to be present at the award. (But now she admits that she, silent and unnoticed, watched her triumph from an anonymous seat in the gallery).

Because of her talent in handling difficult rural teaching problems, and because of her literary work—which daily became more esteemed—her name had by now crossed the local, and even national, limits. And in 1922 she was invited to collaborate in the Rural Education Reform which José Vasconcelos was instituting in Mexico. She remained in that country for two years.

From then on, her career becomes international in character. In 1924 she sets out for her first trip abroad and visits the United States, France and Spain. Her government later sends her to Geneva as its representative to the Committee of Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations. In 1928 she forms part of the administrative council of the Cinematographic Educational Institute founded in Rome. Back from Europe, she comes again to the United States as visiting professor at Columbia University and at Vassar and Middlebury Colleges. She is later given, successively, the Chilean consulship in Naples, Madrid, Lisbon, and finally Nice. At

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<sup>1</sup> Juan José Soiza Reilly, *Mujeres de América*, Buenos Aires, [1934], p. 43.

present (1945) she is the cultural attachée of her country's embassy in Rio de Janeiro.

In 1937 she was sent by the Chilean government on a cultural mission to most of the countries of Spanish America where she was received with great acclaim and fervor. In 1945 she received the highest international recognition when she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

It was in 1914 that "Gabriela Mistral" came into being. Until then her compositions had always borne the signature that revealed her dual Basque ancestry: Lucila Godoy Alcayaga. There has been some disagreement as to the origin of the pseudonym of this "mestiza de vasca"—as she likes to call herself. Some, like Silva Castro,<sup>1</sup> attribute it to her admiration for the Provençal poet Frédéric Mistral whom she mentions among her favorites in her poem "Mis libros"; while others—including Figueroa<sup>2</sup>—more rightly state that it stems from the name sailors give to the strong wind that blows in the Mediterranean: *maestral*, *minstral* or *mistral*. Mañach,<sup>3</sup> saying that she synthesizes the spiritual and the material, sees that fusion in her pen-name: "*Gabriela*: angelic annunciation, presence of the spirit; and *Mistral*: warm breath of the earth" . . .

From the day that the poet Víctor Domingo Silva read her "Sonnets of Death" at the Juegos Florales in Gabriela's "absence," her name triumphantly resounded throughout the nation. Anthologies and other publications readily sought her collaboration. But as yet no book of hers had appeared.

In 1921, Professor Federico de Onís, of Columbia University, made her the subject of a lecture which he gave in the Instituto de las Españas. His audience, which was composed largely of North American teachers of Spanish, was so impressed by the depth and haunting beauty of her poems, with which Professor de Onís punctuated his critical exposition, that it was eager to become better acquainted with the work of this extraordinary woman—herself a teacher. When it was learned that they had never been published in book form, the idea of collecting these poems was born. Thus, her first book, *Desolación*, was published in 1922, not in her native Chile, but in the United States where her admirers have since become legion, and where many of her poems have appeared in translation.

A year later, a second edition, with slight modifications and additions, appeared in Chile, with a new prologue by Pedro Prado. This was followed, in 1926, by another (with some variations and omissions) whose value was enhanced by a penetrating study of the poetess by the eminent Chilean critic *Alone* (Hernán Díaz Arrieta).

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> Jorge Mañach, "Gabriela: Alma y tierra", in *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, New York, 1937, III, p. 108.



The New York edition of *Desolación* was to give rise to a somewhat steady flow of publications—although most of them were merely to reproduce, at least in part, compositions already included in the various editions of her first book. In 1923 she published an anthology, *Lecturas para mujeres*, which she compiled during her sojourn in Mexico. It contains, among countless compositions in prose and verse by outstanding writers of the world, many of her own. That same year the editorial house Cervantes of Barcelona published a selection of her poems in volume LXV of its series *Las mejores poesías (líricas) de los mejores poetas*. In 1924 her children's songs—most of which were already familiar to the readers of *Desolación*—appeared, also in Barcelona, under the title *Ternura*.

Her most recent book is another poetic collection: *Tala* (1938), which, like *Desolación*, was also born "of a circumstance."<sup>1</sup> In 1941 there appeared an *Antología*—under the imprint of the Empresa Editora Zig-Zag of Santiago—which contains a generous selection, by the author, of the preferred poems of her two books: *Desolación* and *Tala*.

Gabriela Mistral's prose is as important as her verse. It consists of numerous articles<sup>2</sup> published in the outstanding periodicals in the Spanish language. These have never appeared in book form. Written in a style that is vigorous, direct, succinct, passionate, they cover a wide and heterogeneous range, as do her interests: history, geography, sociology, literature, politics, life in general. But her main concern is, and has always been, Latin America. And it is its heart-beat that she sounds whether she is speaking of it in general, or of any one specific country: Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Mexico, her native Chile; whether she is describing the Andes, the pampas, the Mexican *magüey*, the Chilean mining lands; whether she is eulogizing its writers, its statesmen, its patriots; or commenting on its language, its peoples, its myths, its native crafts, its traditions, its heritage.

This Americanism of hers is lost—outwardly—in *Desolación* where, with the exception of a dreary and limited Chilean landscape, the only spectacle and climate seen and felt are those of her own bitter, ardent, bleeding soul. But in *Tala*, America—Indoamerica—reappears in all its strength, its glory and its color.

Of the women poets whom we are studying, Gabriela Mistral is the most cosmopolitan, the best known internationally. She is the only one who, besides the general recognition as a poetess and writer, has attained that of being regarded as the spiritual mentor of the Spanish American world in a degree rarely equaled before by any man and never by a woman.

<sup>1</sup> "Alguna circunstancia me arranca siempre el libro que yo había dejado para las Calendas por dejadez criolla. La primera vez el Maestro Onís y los profesores de español de Estados Unidos forzaron mi flojedad y publicaron *Desolación*; ahora entrego *Tala* por no tener otra cosa que dar a los niños españoles dispersados a los cuatro vientos del mundo". (*Tala*, p. 271).

<sup>2</sup> "He vivido veinte años haciendo un periodismo fatigante con el que apenas puedo" . . . (Figuerola, *op. cit.*, p. 257).

Jorge Mañach best defines this poetess in the title of his warm and penetrating essay: "Gabriela: alma y tierra."<sup>1</sup> For she is, indeed, a rare, an extraordinary example of the difficult and not always felicitous wedding of the spiritual and the material, of the abstract and the concrete, of "soul and earth" . . . In her work a perfect blending is achieved, however, not in the conceptual or stylistic sense which results in ideologic or formal antithesis, but in a manner which transcends the artistic. For it is born of a faithful reflection of her personality and manner. Her mind elaborates trenchant thoughts—of almost divine essence—which her pen clothes in the most natural, the most current, the most casual, the most soil-rooted, the most familiar of expressive garb. And this in Gabriela is not forced, nor rhetorical. For it springs directly from her need of close contact with the earth, with reality, with the material, even when expressing the conceptual and the abstract. Her thoughts, therefore, however winged and abstruse, are always earth-bound by her expression which, like her manner, is characterized by its directness, its lack of flourish or ostentation, its homespun quality.

But this corporeality is, as we have said, merely formal; for there is no one further removed from the material than she. Her tastes, in all ways, are ascetic; the mundane foibles and adornments, and all the wiles of feminine allure, hold no meaning for her. She is utterly lacking in that narcissism so characteristic of other women poets—notably Juana de Ibarbourou. When she speaks of herself—which is seldom—she is prone to stress her plainness (which only love can turn to beauty). She never expresses any delight in the materialistic, sensual side of life; no zest in its pleasures. And the thought of death, merely as a devastator of all that is ephemeral or deteriorative, does not haunt or perturb her. Her conception of love is never carnal, for she knows that the flesh is perishable and transitory. The soul alone harbors the all-essential. And the essence of the kiss is there, not on the lips. Therefore death, the disintegrator of all matter, is not—cannot be—the end of love. She is confident that, within the earth, the lover waits for her, unchanged in spirit, although bereft of flesh and of desires; and that when, the weary journey over, she finally takes her place beside him, they will know one another again, and talk for an eternity:

*Sentirás que a tu lado cavan briosamente,  
Que otra dormida llega a la quieta ciudad.  
Esperaré que me hayan cubierto totalmente . . .  
¡Y después hablaremos por una eternidad!*

(“Los sonetos de la muerte”, II)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> Bécquer, in his Rima XXXVII, expresses an almost identical thought:

Delmira Agustini was, stylistically, still dominated by the sumptuous—and oftentimes fatuous—elegance and ornateness of the Modernists. Gabriela Mistral, although she also underwent the modernist influence, is typical of the sober, realistic, more prosaic reaction. Her poems do not exhibit any of the princely and palatial attributes of the Rubendarian school: its pearls, its diamonds, rubies; its agates, emeralds and marbles; its gardens, fountains, parks; its roses, its swans, its doves. And, rather than the mythical Olympian fields, her feet tread the solid ground. They feel beneath them the earth, the soil, “the common clay.” Instead of the intoxicating, sensuous waves of incense, of the voluptuous and exotic perfumes, she breathes the clear, pure, clean, natural rural air. And her eyes do not feast themselves on impossible, unattainable, celestial, super-human or glittering visions, but on “the gold and sweetness of wheat,” on “sacred roads,” on “the green handkerchief” of the trees. Her dictum—so felicitously realized in her life and in her work—has always been: “Give me simplicity, and . . . profundity.”

Definite—although widely heterogeneous—influences have been ascribed to her work. She herself has, verbally and in writing, hailed many “masters”: “. . . el arte me fué revelado en la persona de un libro . . . de aquél que es mi Maestro y al que profeso una admiración fanática, un culto ciego . . . : Vargas Vila”;<sup>1</sup> “Es agradecimiento todo en mi amor de Martí, agradecimiento del escritor que es el Maestro americano más ostensible en mi obra”;<sup>2</sup> “Mis maestros en el arte para regir la vida: la Biblia, el Dante, Tagore y los rusos”.<sup>3</sup> And in a poem, “Mis libros”,<sup>4</sup> she has given what one might call a sentimental bibliography: her favorite writers and books—all of which have been viewed as possible sources:

*¡Biblia, mi noble Biblia, panorama estupendo,  
En donde se quedaron mis ojos largamente,  
Tienes sobre los Salmos como lavas hirvientes  
Y en su río de fuego mi corazón enciendo.*

.....

*Antes que tú me moriré: y mi espíritu  
En su empeño tenaz,  
Sentándose a las puertas de la muerte,  
Allí te esperará.*

.....

*Allí donde el sepulcro que se cierra  
Abre una eternidad . . .  
Todo cuanto los dos hemos callado  
Lo tenemos que hablar!*

<sup>1</sup> Silva Castro, *op. cit.*, p. 5. In the light of such fervent admiration on her part, the “Master’s” judgment of her—some years later—is somewhat severe: “La Mistral es un caso patológico. Para estudiarla hay que recurrir a los libros de medicina”. (R. Maya, “Entrevista con Vargas Vila”, in *Nosotros*, Buenos Aires, 1924, XLVII, pp. 252-253).

<sup>2</sup> G. Mistral, *La lengua de Martí*, La Habana, 1934, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Silva Castro, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Appears in the second edition of *Desolación*, Santiago de Chile, 1923, pp. 52-54.



*Después de ti, tan sólo, me traspasó los huesos  
Con su ancho alarido, el sumo Florentino.  
A su voz todavía como un junco me inclino;  
Por su rojez de infierno fantástica atravieso.*

*Y para refrescar en musgos con rocío  
La boca requemada en las llamas dantescas,  
Busqué las Florecillas de Asís, las siempre frescas  
¡Y en esas felpas dulces se quedó el pecho mío!*

.....

*Poema de Mistral, olor a surco abierto  
Que huele en las mañanas, yo te aspiré embriagada!  
Vi a Mireya exprimir la fruta ensangrentada  
Del amor y correr por al atroz desierto.*

*Te recuerdo también, deshecha de dulzuras,  
Verso de Amado Nervo, con pecho de paloma,  
Que me hiciste más suave la línea de la loma,  
Cuando yo te leía en mis mañanas puras.*

Stylistic similarities and spiritual affinities have been established between this autochthonous Chilean poetess and the Spanish writers of the Golden Age—notably the mystics for their lyric fervor, their expressive vigor, and their verbal “concretion” of the spiritual—, Omar Kháyyám, Victor Hugo, Guerra Junqueiro, Walt Whitman, Rubén Darío, Unamuno, Amado Nervo, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Romain Rolland, Ada Negri . . . But in spite of all these palpable or implied sources of inspiration, her work—both prose and verse—has a marked and unmistakable stamp. For although, especially in the earlier stages, she may have come under the preponderant influence of one writer or another, the very fact that these have been so dissimilar—Vargas Vila, Martí, Tagore—has made her style (which she has gleaned and fashioned from such wide, diverse, and almost contradictory sources) a singular, distinct, and wholly personal one.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF “DESOLACION”

The title *Desolación* applies aptly only to a section of the book—“Dolor”—for not all the compositions included in it are the bitter fruit of that desolation into which the lover’s death plunged her. There are poems which disclose a deeply religious nature; poems of rich Biblical flavor; poems that reveal the depth of an overpowering, but frustrated, maternal feeling; children’s poems; poems that are inspired by her profession; and, finally, those that spring directly from that tragedy that made her feel that it was her tortured heart that bled its red into the sunsets . . . The book closes with a section of “Prose” which contains the “Teacher’s Prayer,” the “Poems of the Mothers,” the “Motifs of the Clay,” the “Poems of Ecstasy,” and other lyrical non-poetic compositions including

some children's tales such as "Why the reeds are hollow," "Why the roses have thorns," etc. At the end there is a "Voto" in which the author says: "God forgive this bitter book . . . In these hundred poems there lies bleeding a past in which the song became blood-drenched to relieve me" . . .

### L o v e

*Tu eres un vaso vaciado. Te volcó un grande amor  
y ya no te vuelves a colmar más . . .*

In the pages of *Desolación* she recalls with nostalgic and live passion all the phases of that love which to her was never sensual gratification—never ecstasy, nor exhilaration, nor joy. For love, as she knew it, was "a bitter exercise." It was not merely that "stubborn, weary sheaf" that is the body, but a wind or breath of God that cuts deep into the "racemes" of the flesh. "*It's what is in the kiss*"—she says—"not on the lips." And that is why she tells the lover not to touch her—expecting to find love in her arms, her mouth, her neck . . . For one day all this will vanish; her body will disintegrate, and she whom he kissed will lie—without lips—in the moist ground ("Intima").

She looks upon love, one might say, as a religion—as something almost tragically serious; something one enters into everlastingly—not "until death do us part," but on to eternity. Death severs the mortal bonds, but love lives on to be resumed beyond this life in "the quiet city" . . . And because love holds so vital a meaning for her; because she fears she may some day lose that which she now considers an inalienable part of herself, she loves with passion, with an overbearing feeling of possession, of ownership—which is deemed more characteristic of man than of woman. In this she is the antithesis of Juana de Ibarbourou and other poetesses who, like her, are the quintessence of femininity in their "weakness," in their surrender, in their whims and irrationalities in love. Gabriela is demanding—domineering. She does not plead with the man to be faithful; she threatens him with heavenly wrath—and with vengeance—if he breaks the sacred tie that binds them. She makes God her conspirator in this, implying that He does not want the lover to live without her. This implication that his faithfulness is *demanded* by an exigent God is poignantly expressed in her powerful poem, "Dios lo quiere":

*Dios no quiere que tú tengas  
Sol, si conmigo no marchas.  
Dios no quiere que tú bebas  
Si yo no tiemblo en tu agua.  
No consiente que tú duermas  
Sino en mi trenza abuecada (D,<sup>1</sup> 107)*

<sup>1</sup> In this study we will use "D" when quoting from *Desolación* (New York, 1922); "T" will be used for *Tala* (Buenos Aires, 1938).

From the day she saw "him" pass along the road—a light song upon his "careless mouth"—she felt the lash of love, and knew that, perhaps, henceforth her face would be bathed in tears; for since she (who had so long walked alone) saw him cross her path, God had clothed her in pain:

*Iba sola y no temía;  
Con hambre y sed no lloraba;  
Desde que lo vi cruzar,  
Mi Dios me vistió de llagas (D, 98)*

She knew the torturing allure of love, its tyranny, and its inevitability. For once one comes under its spell, one cannot escape it—one has to hearken to it, harbor it, believe in it, although one may sense, as she did, that all that leads to death ("Amo amor").

And because the love she felt was so overpowering, so intense, it was ineffable—she could not trust its utterance to the obscure words of man. Moreover, it came from so deep within that its "burning torrent" died before it reached the throat. The excruciating pain of that forced silence was more atrocious to bear, she thought, than death . . . ("El amor que calla").

She who had been ashamed of her sad mouth, her broken voice, her rough, coarse knees, was transfigured and made beautiful by the lover's glance and by his kiss ("Vergüenza"). Yet she, a beggar now turned queen, lived in constant fear of his leaving her, and would ask—even in dreams—if he were still with her:

*Como soy reina y fui mendiga, ahora  
Vivo en puro temblor de que me dejes,  
Y te pregunto, pálida, a cada hora:  
"¿Estás conmigo aún? ¡Ay! no te alejes!"*

*Quisiera hacer las marchas sonriendo  
Y confiando, ahora que has venido;  
Pero hasta en el dormir estoy temiendo  
Y pregunto entre sueños: "¿No te has ido?"*

(D, 109)

Her love delved its way so deep, became so passionate, so desperate, that she was seized with a Medean jealousy which would not tolerate the least transgression on the lover's part. And even as the world had become more beautiful since love "pierced" them with its fragrance, so now "the earth would cast forth snakes"—she warned him—if his soul betrayed her soul. The kiss that he gave another would, inevitably, reach her ears; the caves would re-echo his perfidious words to her; and the clouds would mirror above her the face of her whom he loved. "Go forth like a thief to kiss her"—she said—"but when you lift up her head, you will find my tear-stained face." Even death could not free him from the dire



retribution of her wrath: for ten years he would lie beneath the earth, with hands outstretched, to receive her scalding tears:

*Pero te va a brotar víboras  
La tierra si vendes mi alma;*

.....

*Beso que tu boca entregue  
A mis oídos alcanza,  
Porque las grutas profundas  
Me devuelven tus palabras.  
El polvo de los senderos  
Guarda el olor de tus plantas  
Y oteándolo, como un ciervo,  
Te sigo por las montañas . . .*

*A la que tú ames, las nubes  
La pintan sobre mi casa.  
Vé cual ladrón a besarla  
De la tierra en las entrañas;  
Mas, cuando el rostro le alces,  
Hallas mi cara con lágrimas (D, 107)*

But her fears were founded in truth. And when she saw him pass by "with another" ("Balada"), she asked God what reason there was now for her to be upon the "pallid earth" ("Extasis"). In her maddening wrath against this other Judas ("me vendió el que besó mi mejilla"), she fervently prayed the Lord to snatch the faithless one from the clutches of those "fatal hands," or to sink him in "the long sleep" which He alone knows how to give ("Sonetos de la muerte", III) . . .

When the lover himself broke "the tremendous pact" and died without having awaited God's signal; when he, voluntarily, stayed "the rosy bark of his living," she at first could not grasp the significance of that dire meaning. And forgetting that his "light foot" had now turned to ashes, she again went to their usual meeting-place:

*Yo me olvidé que se hizo  
Ceniza tu pie ligero,  
Y, como en los buenos tiempos,  
Sali a encontrarte al sendero (D, 123)*

Thoughts of him became an obsession, and she constantly saw his image: he touched her in the night-dew, bled in the sunsets, looked for her in the moonbeams:

*Me toca en el relente;  
Se sangra en los ocasos;  
Me busca con el rayo  
De luna, por los antros (D, 125)*

Life became aimless and bitter—everything in her mouth acquired "a persistent taste of tears." And yet,—as she went along singing her "beautiful

vengeance"—she had one consolation: no longer would his mouth know the shame of that kiss which "dripped concupiscence"; nor would the hand of any other woman dispute with her over his handful of bones! She longed to see him again—it mattered not where, she said, nor how:

*... Volverlo a ver, no importa dónde,  
En remansos de cielo, o en vórtice hervidor,  
Bajo unas lunas plácidas o en cárdeno horror!* (D, 131)

—to wrap herself about his bleeding neck . . .

And although she was aware of the sin he perpetrated by taking his own life, she begged God to forgive him, calling Him "Father," for that word "tastes more of love."<sup>1</sup> He was her "all"—she told Him—in a passage vibrant with beauty and poignant simplicity: her glass of freshness, the honeycomb of her mouth, the lime of her bones, the sweet reason of her day, the chirping in her ear, the girdle of her dress! ("El ruego"). And she felt ashamed to live on in so cowardly a manner—for she neither went in search of him nor succeeded in forgetting ("Coplas").

Yet gradually his image faded, and as she desperately, but vainly, "scratched" her wretched memory in an attempt to recover it, she felt that she was never more like a beggar than now—without the memory of him. For having his semblance was like having a child of his—like a fragrance emanating from her bones . . . But perhaps, she thought, it was not merely his image that she had lost, but her own soul on which she had once hewn his likeness like a wound ("Coplas"). Her "premature widowhood," as Rafael Estenger<sup>2</sup> aptly calls it, left her desolate—bereft of the two beings who would have made her life complete and rich: the husband and the potential son.

One of the qualities of Gabriela which distinguish her from most of the other women poets is her chastity. For she is one of the very few poetesses who view love soberly and purely. Perhaps the use of the words "esposo" and "hijo" lends a tone of propriety to her poems of love which are wholly lacking in that erotic abandon and carnal urge so characteristic

<sup>1</sup> *Te llamaré  
Padre, porque  
La palabra me sabe a más amor . . .* (D, 75)

The Spanish dramatist of the Golden Age, Mira de Amescua, offers a similar distinction between the words "Señor" and "Padre":

*Señor,—dije mal "señor"  
Que en este nombre hay rigor  
Por la sucesión del hombre—  
Padre digo, porque es nombre  
De más dulzura y amor.*

(El esclavo del demonio).

<sup>2</sup> "Gabriela Mistral, virgen y madre", in *Cuba Contemporánea*, La Habana, 1927, XLIX, p. 220.

of Delmira, for instance, for whom the body was "a divan of delight." And how different the connotation, in her poems, of the words *flesh, body, arms, hands, mouth, lips, tongue . . .* from that which they assume in the ardent and voluptuous verse of so many other poetesses.

### Maternity

*Una que amó, y cuyo amor pidió,  
al recibir el beso, la eternidad . . .*

Her conception of love is, as we have said, profoundly religious and pure. Its purpose is not to appease desire, to satisfy carnal appetites, but soberly to give thought to the richest, the most precious, the most sacred heritage of woman: maternity.<sup>1</sup> That, as she says in the introduction to *Lecturas para mujeres*, is woman's only reason for being in this world:

Y sea profesionista, obrera, campesina o simple dama, su única razón de ser sobre el mundo es la maternidad, la material y la espiritual juntas, o la última en las mujeres que no tenemos hijos . . .

Sterility, therefore, is woman's greatest tragedy and shame:

*La mujer que no mece un hijo en el regazo,  
Cuyo calor y aroma alcance a sus entrañas,  
Tiene una laxitud de mundo entre los brazos;  
Todo su corazón congoja inmensa baña.*

*.....  
¡Y una mendiga grávida, cuyo seno florece  
Cual la parva de Enero, de vergüenza la cubre!*

(D, 18)

Yet woman is, instinctively, a mother. And she who was never to cradle a child in her own bosom; who was never to feel its "warmth and aroma" permeate the innermost fibers of her being; who was never to dissolve into tenderness for the fruit of her own womb, feels maternal towards all children.<sup>2</sup> That is why her profession has always been so sacred to her, for she

<sup>1</sup> . . . "la santidad de la vida comienza en la maternidad, la cual es, por lo tanto, sagrada". (D, 185).

<sup>2</sup> One of her best poems, "El niño solo" (D, 19), expresses this sentiment:

*Como escuchase un llanto, me paré en el repecho  
y me acerqué a la puerta del rancho del camino.  
Un niño de ojos dulces me miró desde el lecho  
¡y una ternura inmensa me embriagó como un vino!*

*La madre se tardó, curvada en el barbecho;  
el niño, al despertar, buscó el pezón de rosa  
y rompió en llanto . . . Yo lo estreché contra el pecho,  
y una canción de cuna me subió, temblorosa . . .*

*Por la ventana abierta la luna nos miraba.  
El niño ya dormía, y la canción bañaba,  
como otro resplandor, mi pecho enriquecido . . .*

*Y cuando la mujer, trémula, abrió la puerta,  
me vería en el rostro tanta ventura cierta,  
¡que me dejó el infante en los brazos dormido!*



feels that through it she fulfils, at least in part, the mission of all women: spiritual—if not physical—maternity. In her now famous "Teacher's prayer" she asks God to make her *more maternal than the mothers* so that she may "love and defend," as they do, those who are not flesh of her flesh . . .

The thought of her impotent motherhood recurs to torture her:

*No espigaré entre mis rodillas  
Un niño rubio como mies (D, 28)*

*Baldías del hijo, rompo  
Mis rodillas desoladas (D, 106)*

but nowhere more tragically than in the first part of the "Poema del hijo":<sup>1</sup>

*¡Un hijo, un hijo, un hijo! Yo quise un hijo tuyo  
Y mío, allá en los días del éxtasis ardiente,*  
.....

*Decía: ¡un hijo!, como el árbol conmovido  
De primavera alarga sus yemas hacia el cielo.*  
.....

*Sus brazos en guirnalda a mi cuello trenzados;  
El río de mi vida bajando hacia él, fecundo,  
Y mis entrañas como perfume derramado  
Ungiendo, en ese infante, las colinas del mundo.*

*Al cruzar una madre grávida, la miramos  
Con los labios convulsos y los ojos de ruego,  
Cuando en las multitudes con nuestro amor pasamos.  
¡Y un niño de ojos dulces nos dejó como ciegos!*

*En las noches, insomne de dicha y de visiones,  
La lujuria de fuego no descendió a mi lecho.  
Para el que nacería vestido de canciones,  
Yo extendía mi brazo, yo ahuecaba mi pecho . . .*

*El sol no parecíame, para bañarlo, intenso;  
Mirándome, yo odié, por toscas, mis rodillas;  
Mi corazón, confuso, temblaba al dón inmenso;  
¡Y un llanto de humildad regaba mis mejillas! (D, 138-139)*

Yet, later, when the hope of maternity vanishes, she rationalizes that a child of hers might have had her "tired mouth," her "bitter heart," her "defeated voice"; that it might have been born with the lover's poisonous heart, his lips (which would have again abjured); that it might some day have said, with rancor, what she herself had inwardly said to her father: "Why has your flesh been fecund?" And so she blesses her fruitless womb, and is content to know that her hapless race has died within it . . .

But the maternal urge is so strong in her that she sees its reflection in

<sup>1</sup> "My most deep-felt poem"—she once said—"is the 'Poema del hijo', lament of my useless existence".

every aspect of life, in all manifestations of nature. The earth itself is a woman with a child in her arms; the mountain, too, is a mother, and in the afternoons the fog plays about her shoulders and knees like a child; the tree is but a "sweet womb" that harbors nests; the open furrow, in its soft depths beneath the sun, is like an ardent cradle; the vine—like a newly-delivered mother—is fatigued from its abundant producing;<sup>1</sup> the rain is fearful and sad, like a suffering child. And even God is invested with maternal feelings as He sings His cradle-songs to that saintly "maestra rural" who gave herself so noiselessly to death:

*Y en su Dios se ha dormido, como en cojín de luna;  
Almohada de sus sienes, una constelación.<sup>2</sup>  
Canta el Padre para ella sus canciones de cuna  
¡Y la paz llueve largo sobre su corazón! (D, 44)*

She who saw her own dire love bring only bitterness and sorrow; she who had been often harsh and commanding, exigent and domineering, melts into maternal tenderness when he who "passed with another" and aroused her wrath and the desire for vengeance, lies defenseless, like a dolorous child—and no longer alluring—in the pallid sleep of death:

*Te acostaré en la tierra soleada, con una  
Dulcedumbre de madre para el hijo dormido,  
Y la tierra ha de hacerse suavidades de cuna  
Al recibir tu cuerpo de niño dolorido (D, 118)*

No book of hers has appeared without a section of cradle-songs. And although they never reach the intensity, the perfection and the depth of those poems in which she unveils the bleeding tragedy of her soul, they are, nonetheless, so tender and moving that another poetess, María Olimpia de Obaldía, herself a mother, asks her where she learned the rhythm of the cradle-song which she sings low, with the softness of moonlight:

*¿Dónde aprendiste el ritmo de la canción de cuna  
Que cantas quedamente, con suavidad de luna?*

## Death

Owing, undoubtedly, to the spiritual crisis which she had so recently suffered, she shows in *Desolación* a constant preoccupation with death; death which in her mind is so irrevocably linked with destiny—that "fatal mixture of blood and tears." It is the thought that *we have to die*,

<sup>1</sup> She follows through the analogy in intellectual "production", and feels that her verse, like a child, is nurtured with her blood: "Como un hijo con cuajo de mi sangre se sustenta él". And in "The artist's decalogue" she gives as one of the precepts: "You shall give forth your work as one gives a child: drawing blood from your heart" . . .

<sup>2</sup> These two lines are reminiscent of Delmira's: "El dios duerme, Julieta; su almohada es de estrellas" . . .

that we are but "flesh of the grave" that causes the Thinker in the initial poem of the book, "El Pensador de Rodin," to twitch in bitter anguish. And no tree twisted by the sun in the plain—she tells us—, no lion of wounded flank, suffers the pain, the agony and the terror of this man who meditates on death:

*Con el mentón caído sobre la mano ruda,  
El Pensador se acuerda que es carne de la huesa,  
Carne fatal, delante del destino desnuda,  
Carne que odia la muerte, y tembló de belleza.*

*Y tembló de amor, toda su primavera ardiente,  
Y ahora, al otoño, anégase de verdad y tristeza.  
El "de morir tenemos" pasa sobre su frente,  
En todo agudo bronce, cuando la noche empieza.*

*En la angustia, sus músculos se hienden, sufridores.  
Cada surco en la carne se llena de terrores.  
Se hiende, como la hoja de otoño, al Señor fuerte*

*Que le llama en los bronces . . . Y no hay árbol torcido  
De sol en la llanura, ni león de flanco herido,  
Crispados como este hombre que medita en la muerte (D, 5)*

Still, we all know that the "long weariness" of living will grow upon us some day, and that the soul will tell the body that it no longer wants to drag its weary mass along the rosy path that men, happy to live, traverse ("Los sonetos de la muerte": II). And that at the thought of our "orphanhood," of our solitude, as we go alone through the world, "all flesh, with anguish, asks to die" ("In memoriam"). These are the conflicting thoughts that burden her mind at nightfall . . .

The process of disintegration repeatedly comes to her mind when she thinks of that "disgregadora impura" which is death. That is why, perhaps, the flesh, as we have seen, holds no real meaning for her; for it is merely the guileful, perishable covering of that divine essence—that "breath of God"—we have within; a "weary, reticent sheaf" that crumbles when She of the Deep Eyes casts her dire, somber and withering glance upon it.

Always prone to be concrete, her descriptions of death are graphic and specific. Not content with the mere suggesting of its outward signs and symptoms, she seems to find a certain morbid delight in evoking, with precise detail, its lurid physical aspects:

*Y la tremenda albura cayó sobre tu faz (D, 26)*

*¿Quién te alcanzó en los ojos el estupor de Dios? (D, 27)*

*.....Todo  
El estupor que blanquea las caras  
En la agonía . . . (D, 102)*



*Me olvidé de que te hicieron  
Sordo para mi clamor.  
Me olvidé de tu silencio  
Y de tu cárdeno albor,  
  
De tu inerte mano torpe  
Ya para buscar mi mano;  
¡De tus ojos dilatados  
Del inquirir soberano!* (D, 124)

These descriptions become more harrowing and gory when applied—as in the case of the lover—to suicide:

*¿Cómo quedan, Señor, durmiendo los suicidas?  
¿Un cuajo entre la boca, las dos sienas vaciadas,  
Las lunas de los ojos albas y engrandecidas,  
Hacia un ancla invisible las manos orientadas?* (D, 121)

She seems obsessed with the care and "adjusting" of the dead after the last agony—perhaps because she herself was not present when the lover's defenseless, desolate body most needed her tender care and ministrations ("¡Qué tú, amortajadora descuidada / no cerraste sus párpados / ni ajustaste sus brazos en la caja!"):

*¿Quién te juntó las manos? ¿Quién dió, rota la voz,  
La oración de los muertos al borde de tu lecho?* (D, 27)  
  
*¿O Tú llegas después que los hombres se han ido,  
Y les bajas el párpado sobre el ojo cegado,  
Acomodas las vísceras sin dolor y sin ruido  
Y entrecruzas las manos sobre el pecho callado?* (D, 121)

## Religion

Her poems reveal a deep religiousness which, like all her other emotions—her love, her jealousy, her maternal feeling—is also strong and vehement. But her religion is not conventional, dogmatic or doctrinal. For as Nieto Caballero<sup>1</sup> says, "she carries her cathedral within."

Rather than to the Virgin, to whom Juana de Ibarbourou dedicates such tender and devout pages, Gabriela, in her Calvary, speaks to Christ—not the benign, the gentle Christ, the Shepherd, but to the tortured and bleeding One:

*Cristo, el de las carnes en gajos abiertas;  
Cristo, el de las venas vaciadas en ríos . . .* (D, 7)

or to a God of wrath and vengeance—He of the "terrible and strong" breast, Who knows how to mete out just punishment. Some of the poems

<sup>1</sup> L. E. Nieto Caballero, "Gabriela Mistral", in *Repertorio Americano*, San José, Costa Rica, January 11, 1930.

are definite prayers or hymns ("Al oído de Cristo", "Himno al árbol", "Plegaria por el nido", "Hablando al Padre", "Tribulación", "Nocturno", "El ruego" . . .); others—in their themes, in their allusions, in their imagery—breathe and exhale the serene, the noble, the patriarchal air of that "stupendous panorama" which is the Bible.

In her prayers there is always the passionate note, and a forceful—and almost commanding—tone which could be considered irreverent were it not born of that vehemence and one-purposeness so characteristic of her in all things. This is seen, better than elsewhere, in "El ruego" where she threatens to *fatigue* His ear with prayers and with sobs for the rest of her life—or until He pardons him (whom she loved) for having shattered his temples:

*Aquí me estoy, Señor, con la cara caída  
Sobre el polvo, parlándote un crepúsculo entero,  
O todos los crepúsculos a que alcance la vida,  
Si tardas en decirme la palabra que espero.*

*Fatigaré tu oído de preces y sollozos,  
Lamiendo, lebel tímido, los bordes de tu manto,  
Y ni pueden huírme tus ojos amorosos  
Ni esquivar tu pie el riego caliente de mi llanto.*

*¡Di el perdón, dilo al fin! (D, 136)*

## Nature

Although Gabriela Mistral is not what is conventionally known as a poet of nature—for her descriptions are seldom objective, seldom purely esthetic—there is in this book the constant presence of the soil that nurtured her, of the rustic scenes and labors, and of the various natural phenomena with which more than once she identifies herself.

The rural surroundings in which she passed the earlier part of her life left their lasting imprint on her soul and on her work, and the familiar landscapes are depicted, not merely as such, as we have already said, but more often to reflect a personal state of mind or emotion. Her "nature background," therefore, is somewhat limited; for she selects, for the most part, those aspects of it that best mirror and interpret her moods—especially when she was felled by the driving wind of tragedy. And succumbing to the so-called "pathetic fallacy," she is prone to infuse her own feelings into what would otherwise be "static" nature. Characteristic of these "nature-moods" are her descriptions of desolate and arid expanses:

*En la tierra yerma,  
Sobre aquel desierto  
Mordido de sol . . .*

.....

*En la estepa inmensa  
En la estepa yerta  
De desolación . . . (D, 48)*

solitary, suffering trees:

*En el medio del llano,  
Un árbol seco su blasfemia alarga;  
Un árbol blanco, roto  
Y mordido de llagas . . . (D, 151)*

*Uno, torcido, tiende  
Su brazo inmenso y de follaje trémulo  
Hacia otro, y sus heridas  
Como dos ojos son, llenos de ruego (D, 153)*

sobbing and howling winds:

*El viento hace a mi casa su ronda de sollozos  
Y de alarido . . . (D, 149)*

*. . . el viento, vuelto  
Mi desesperación, aúlla y pasa (D, 151)*

fearful, sad, plaintive, "vanquished" rain:

*Esta agua medrosa y triste*

.....

*Este fino llanto amargo*

.....

*No llueve: es un sangrar lento  
y largo.*

.....

*Este largo y fatigante*

*Descender de aguas vencidas . . . (D, 166)*

mute, incessant snow:

*Siempre ella, silenciosa . . .*

*. . . siempre su azahar sobre mi casa;*

*Siempre, como el destino, que ni mengua ni pasa . . . (D, 150)*

Her dolorous spirit, moreover, does not look to the hope or promise of dawn, but rather to the blackness of night in which to lose sight of the mantle of tears that clothes her. Night, therefore, lends its bleakness, its dourness, its tragedy, to these "tone poems" of hers. But they are more frequently infused with the burning red of the bleeding sunsets ("la hora de la tarde, la que pone / su sangre en las montañas") which are so colored, she sometimes thinks, by the gaping wounds that sorrow and pain left within her:

*¿Seré yo la que baño  
La cumbre de escarlata?*



*Llevo a mi corazón la mano, y siento  
Que mi costado mana (D, 164)*

*Y en cualquier país las tardes  
Con sangre serán mis llagas (D, 108)*

Her descriptions—and comparisons—are rich in nature imagery (with which she constantly evokes spiritual analogies):

*Estoy lo mismo que estanque colmado  
Y te parezco un surtidor inerte (D, 101)*

*Si tú me miras yo me vuelvo hermosa  
Como la yerba a que bajó el rocío (D, 110)*

*En esta hora, amarga como un sorbo de mares (D, 114)*

*Cada surco en la carne se llena de terrores.  
Se hiende, como la hoja de otoño, al Señor fuerte (D, 5)*

*Eran sus barbas dos sendas de flores (D, 15)*

*Pecho, el de mi Cristo,  
Más que los ocasos,  
Más, ensangrentado . . . (D, 20)*

*Más espeso que el musgo oscuro  
De las grutas, mis culpas son;  
Es más terco, te lo aseguro,  
Que tu peña, mi corazón! (D, 30)*

*. . . En mis días,  
Como la lluvia eterna de los Polos, gotea  
La amargura . . . (D, 139)*

And the more active and vital aspects of rural life—the harvest, the vintage—are often pictured, especially in her imagery of such superb earthy and live quality:

*Creo en mi corazón, el que en la siembra  
Por el surco sin fin fué acrecentado (D, 36)*

*Ruth, más callada que espiga vencida (D, 16)*

*Ya en la mitad de mis días espigo  
Esta verdad con frescura de flor.  
La vida es oro y dulzura de trigo . . . (D, 24)*

*No espigaré entre mis rodillas  
Un niño rubio como mies (D, 28)*

*Pasó por él su fina, su delicada esteva,  
Abriendo surcos donde alojar perfección (D, 44)*

*Te acordaste del negro racimo,  
Y lo diste al lagar carmesí;  
Y aventaste las hojas del álamo  
Con tu aliento en el aire sutil.  
¡Y en el ancho lagar de la muerte  
Aún no quieres mi pecho exprimir! (D, 116)*

*Apacenté los hijos ajenos, colmé el troje  
Con los trigos divinos . . . (D, 141)*

Maternity is logically related to harvesting:

*Y una mendiga grávida, cuyo seno florece  
Cual la parva de Enero . . . (D, 18)*  
*Segar te vi en Enero los trigos de tu hijo . . . (D, 17)*

Sometimes nature is obdurate and remains insensible to her joy or to her sorrow:

*Le he encontrado en el sendero.  
No turbó su ensueño el agua  
Ni se abrieron más las rosas (D, 97)*  
*Sin un impetu la tarde  
Se apagó tras de los álamos.  
Por mi corazón mendigo  
Ella no se ha ensangrentado . . . (D, 159)*

But more often she—like God—is her conspirator in love: "The very earth will disown you / if your soul barter my soul" . . .<sup>1</sup>

*La tierra se hace madrastra  
Si tu alma vende a mi alma.  
Llevan un escalofrío  
De tribulación las aguas.*

.....

*Pero te va a brotar víboras  
La tierra si vendes mi alma . . .*

.....

*Beso que tu boca entregue  
A mis oídos alcanza,  
Porque las grutas profundas  
Me devuelven tus palabras.  
El polvo de los senderos  
Guarda el olor de tus plantas . . .*

.....

*A la que tú ames las nubes  
La pintan sobre mi casa . . . (D, 106-107)*

The image of the lover—after his death—is not only carried deep within (engraved upon her soul) but is reflected in the sunsets, in the moonbeams, the wind, the snow, and other sympathetic aspects of nature:

*Me toca en el relente;  
Se sangra en los ocasos;  
Me busca con el rayo  
De luna, por los antros.*

.....

<sup>1</sup> "God wills it". Translation of "Dios lo quiere", by Katherine Garrison Chapin, in *Poetry*, Chicago, 1941, LIX, 123-125.

*Le he dicho que deseo  
Morir, y él no lo quiere,  
Por palparme en los vientos,  
Por cubrirme en las nieves;  
  
Por moverse en mis sueños,  
Como a flor de semblante,  
Por llamarme en el verde  
Pañuelo de los árboles (D, 125)*

## Style

There is never any gaiety in her poetry—nor lightness—for her emotions are always ardently passionate (in the love poems), intensely serious (in the “philosophic” or religious ones), or poignantly tender (in the maternal ones, or cradle-songs). Her tone, when not tragic, is preeminently sad. For life, love, nature—which, at some time or another, may smile at other poets—turn only a tear-stained face to her.

Pain, therefore,—the pain of life, the pain of love, the pain of death—bitter, burning, disconsolate or excruciating pain, is the constant companion of *Desolación*. And there are few poets who express it in richer detail, with more plasticity, or with greater violence than she. For she seems to find sensual—almost perverse—pleasure in depicting mental and physical anguish, agony, terror; in voicing the moans, the cries, the shrieks that such pain induces; in evoking the image of open, gaping, oozing wounds; of flesh rent into palpitating shreds; of veins emptying into rivers of blood . . .

Her vocabulary<sup>1</sup>—which, in general, is not uncommonly rich or varied—acquires then an extraordinary force and intensity, mainly through the repetitious, constant use of certain words suggestive of bodily suffering and pain: of burning, of piercing, of rending, of cutting, of cleaving, of bleeding.<sup>2</sup>

The following *verbs of violence* appear again and again in *Desolación*: *hender* (to cleave, to split), *romper* (to break, to cut asunder), *rasgar* (to rend, to claw, to lacerate), *morder* (to bite, to gnaw), *clavar* (to nail, to gore), *socarrar* (to singe, to scorch), *hurgar* (to stir, to poke, to dig—as a wound), *taladrar* (to bore, to perforate), *arañar* (to scratch, to claw), *tronchar* (to chop off, to break with violence), *trizar* (to break into fragments—as with a blow), *llagar* (to wound), *desgarrar* (to rend, to tear), *magullar* (to mangle), *azotar* (to whip, to lash). Equally abundant are the incisive and piercing instruments: *garfio* (hook), *hierro* (iron

<sup>1</sup> Silva Castro has made a special study of it in his *Estudios sobre Gabriela Mistral*, pp. 149-227.

<sup>2</sup> Silva Castro speaks of her verbal and ideologic *sadism*, and of how “she seems to be seized with delirium when speaking of hooks and knives” . . . (*Retratos literarios*, Santiago de Chile, 1932, p. 157).



—instrument to wound with), *zarpa* (claw), *cuchillo* (knife), *puñal* (dagger), *clavo* (nail, iron spike). The words *llaga* (sore), *herida* (wound), and *sangre* (blood)—a logical result of all this flogging and cutting—abound, as does *entraña* (entrail) to designate the depth of her feeling, her pain, her passion . . . There is no dearth of examples, for almost every page contains lines like the following:

*¡Garfios, hierros, zarpas, que sus carnes hiendan  
Tal como se hienden quemadas gavillas;  
Llamas que a su gajo caduco se prendan,  
Llamas de suplicio: argollas, cuchillas!* (D, 8)

*Pecho, el de mi Cristo,  
Más que los ocasos,  
Más, ensangrentado . . .  
.....*

*Costado de Cristo,  
Otro labio abierto  
Regando la vida:  
Desde que te he visto  
Rasqué mis heridas!* (D, 20)

*Tengo ha veinte años en la carne hundido  
—Y es caliente el puñal—  
.....*

*El que vino a clavarlo en mis entrañas  
Tenga piedad!* (D, 22)

*Los hierros que le abrieron el pecho . . .* (D, 43)

*Mi Dios me vistió de llagas* (D, 98)

*Rasga vasos de flor, hiende el hondo glaciar* (D, 99)

*Y me clavo con un dejo  
De salmuera en tu garganta* (D, 108)

*Me socarró la boca . . .* (D, 114)

*Por la mojada puerta de las bondas heridas* (D, 121)

*. . . Sabía suya la entraña que llagaba* (D, 136)

She is prone to use words that *intensify* the feeling or expression—sometimes resorting to hyperbole:

*. . . Socarradura larga  
Que hace aullar!* (D, 23)

*A la sombra de Dios grita lo que supiste . . .* (D, 27)

*Fatigaré tu oído de preces y sollozos* (D, 136)

*Cristo, el de las carnes en gajos abiertas;  
Cristo, el de las venas vaciadas en ríos . . .* (D, 7)

*Raza judía, río de amargura . . .*

.....

*Y crece aún tu selva de clamores . . .* (D, 10)

*Manos que sangraron con grañíos y en ríos* (D, 39)

People—and things—are *twisted, knifed, bitten* by the sun, by anguish, by sores, by thirst and hunger:

*. . . árbol torcido*

*de sol . . .* (D, 5)

*El sol caldeo su espalda acuchilla* (D, 14)

*. . . desierto*

*Mordido de sol . . .* (D, 48)

*Un árbol . . .*

*. . . mordido de llagas* (D, 151)

*Retorcido de angustia y sol* (D, 155)

*Te muerden la sed y el hambre* (D, 107)

And although her manner has an outward calmness—"the exterior serenity of a rock"—her actions and gestures, as expressed in her poetry, are indicative of a vehement, turbulent, tempestuous and volcanic nature:

*Baldías del hijo, rompo*

*Mis rodillas desoladas* (D, 106)

*Boca atribulada y convulsa . . .* (D, 127)

*Deshechas las rodillas, retorcida la boca* (D, 140)

*Araño en la ruin memoria;*

*Me desgarró y no te encuentro* (D, 143)

*Yo muerdo un verso de locura* (D, 34)

Yet, in spite of all this verbal violence, there are few people more tender than this "maestra rural" whose eyes are hollowed deep to harbor more tears, and whose smile is but a way of weeping with kindness . . . That is what is so extraordinary about her poetry which has the rare power of disclosing, simultaneously, a vehemence which disconcerts, and a softness and tenderness which are not common—even in women.

### 3. ANALYSIS OF "TALA"

*Tala*, published in 1938, is the vintage of sixteen years of intense and errant living. This is a more complex book than the first, and reflects the spiritual vicissitudes which attended her for nearly two decades. Its mastery, its sureness of style and precise choice of words reveal the mature artist who has gone through the bitter exercise of attaining that much-

prized "difficult simplicity."<sup>1</sup> The tragic love note, the morbid preoccupation with death, the vehemence—dominant in *Desolación*—are now superseded by far more varied motifs, by a serenity that reveals an emotion more contained (whose key note is hope), and by an expression less tortured.

Yet, basically, this book is not so very different from the other (as one might suppose at a cursory glance). And Gabriela is the first to recognize it: "This book carries a small residue of *Desolación*", she says in the notes, "and the book that follows it—if one is to follow—will also carry a residue of *Tala*." She then gives a homely, rural illustration of this process of "continuity" which applies to artistic endeavor as well as to nature: "It is thus in my valley of Elqui with the pressing of the grapes. Pulp upon pulp remains in the fissures of the wine-press. The peons of the vintage come upon them afterwards. The wine has already been made and that is left for the next round of the baskets."

In the "Voto" of *Desolación*, where she spoke of that "bleeding past" which her poems disclosed, she expressed the hope that in the future, in a more clement spiritual clime, she would sing "words of hope" without looking again at her heart. And in the poem "Palabras serenas," also of that first book, she had said:

*Mudemos ya por el verso sonriente  
Aquel listado de sangre con hiel* (D, 24)

For in the mid-course of her life she (who before had seemed to revel in the pleasurable cold—"gustoso frío"—of the knife of pain that cut her) "harvested" this truth: that life is the gold and sweetness of wheat; that hate is brief, while love is "immense"; that a brooklet can make us smile, even though our eyes be heavy with weeping; and that the mere singing of a lark makes us sometimes forget that "it is hard to die." And knowing that "the fruits of grief" are neither good nor beautiful, in *Tala*, too, she strives to give us "the praise of happiness," as the "tremendous voyage" across the "thick fog" of sorrow (her mother's death) finally ends in the hope of the "Locas letanías":

*¡Recibe a mi madre, Cristo,  
Dueño de ruta y de tránsito,  
Nombre que ella va diciendo,  
Sésamo que irá gritando,  
Abra nuestra de los cielos,  
Albatros no amortajado,  
Gozo que llaman los valles.  
¡Resucitado, Resucitado!* (T, 34)

If the crucial moment of the lover's death brought about the tortured pages which gave title to her first book, that of her mother's results in

<sup>1</sup> Gabriela once said: "Yo he sufrido mucho para llegar a cierta sencillez". (Figuerola, *op. cit.*, p. 138).



several poems of a calm, mystic flavor. And the maternal note—so strong, so passionate, so persistent in *Desolación*—is more subtly, perhaps, but no less forcefully present in this book whose very birth reveals a maternal gesture of the highest order.<sup>1</sup>

Already in *Desolación* one saw her ascetic disregard for the material in her interpretation of love, of life, of death. But in *Tala* one can discern, with greater clarity, this process of “de-materialization” as she denudes herself of all mundane wants and fears, and emerges pure and serene in “the sweet air” of her hope and of her faith. She is spiritually richer now (“Tengo la dicha fiel / y la dicha perdida”), and she is reconciled to the duality of life which has the sensuous delights of the rose and the poignant prick of the thorn (“¡Ay! qué amante es la rosa / y qué amada la espina”). She rests content in the knowledge that there are two angels that watch over her simultaneously—one that brings her happiness, and one that brings her pain:

*No tengo sólo un Angel  
Con ala estremecida:  
Me mecen como al mar  
Mecen las dos orillas  
El Angel que da el gozo  
Y el que da la agonía . . . (T, 47)*

And so not even the loss of deep spiritual joys can wring from her a “cry of agony,” nor dampen her newly-found peace, for she now knows that “the eternal soul” suffers no loss:

*Tuve la estrella viva en mi regazo,  
Y entera ardí como un tendido ocaso.  
Tuve también la gruta en que pendía  
El sol, y donde no acababa el día.  
Y no supe guardarlos . . .  
.....  
Y los perdí, sin grito de agonía,  
Que vengo de una tierra  
En donde el alma eterna no perdía (T, 38)*

Some of her lines recall the mystic fervor of Saint Theresa (with whom she has more than once been compared), and of Saint John of the Cross<sup>2</sup>—

<sup>1</sup> See p. 176, note 1.

<sup>2</sup> In *Desolación*, also, there were passages which recalled the manner—and expression—of the author of *Cántico espiritual*. San Juan in his “Canciones entre el Alma y el Esposo” wrote:

*Ni ya tengo otro oficio,  
Que ya sólo en amar es mi ejercicio.  
.....  
Después que me miraste:  
Que gracia y hermosura en mi dejaste.*

Gabriela, likewise, uses the words “oficio” and “ejercicio” in reference to love: and the loved one’s glance, in her case, too, can transform plainness into beauty:

both in concept and in style:

*Algún día ha de venir  
El Dios verdadero  
A su hija robada, moja  
De hombre pregonero.  
Me soplará entre la boca  
Beso que le espero,  
Miaja o resina ardiendo  
Por la que me muero (T, 41)*

*Acaba de llegar, Cristo, a mis brazos,  
Peso divino, dolor que me entregan . . . (T, 31)*

*"En los filos altos  
Del alma he vivido:  
Donde ella espejea  
De luz y cuchillos,  
En tremendo amor  
Y en salvaje ímpetu,  
En grande esperanza  
Y en rasado bastío.  
Y por las cimera  
Del alma fué herido."*

*"Y ahora me llega  
Del mar de mi olvido  
Ademán y seña  
De mi Jesucristo,  
Que, como en la fábula  
El último vino,  
Y en redes ni cáñamos  
Ni lazos me ha herido."*

*"Y me doy entero  
Al dueño divino  
Que me lleva como  
Un viento o un río" (T, 178)*

While others seem to stem from that "popular"—folkloric—vein in which Spanish poetic tradition is so rich:

*La mañanita  
Pura y rasada  
Quedó linda  
De la venteada.*

.....

---

*Ya no tengo otro oficio  
Después del callado de amarte . . . (D, 127)*

*Y amar (bien sabes de eso) es amargo ejercicio . . . (D, 136)*

*Si tú me miras, yo me vuelvo hermosa . . . (D, 110)*

*Y yo me alcé  
Con lucerada;  
Medio era noche,  
Medio albada (T, 54-55)*

There is in *Tala* a keener mental subtlety, a more volatile and hermetic quality (notably in the sections "Alucinación" and "Historias de loca") than in the first book where plasticity and directness always made the meaning clear—perhaps because now some things are seen through the inventive and scintillating facets of the imagination and fantasy, or through the undulating maze of allegory.

But she has not lost touch with the earth. And like Antaeus she always seems to gain new vitality, new strength, new confidence from her contact with it. That is what lends such vigor and warmth and "substance" to her "Materias" which sing of the simple, the elemental, the vital things: bread, salt, water, air—all of which seem so much a part of her and of her work:

*Huele a mi madre cuando dió su leche,  
Huele a tres valles por donde he pasado:  
A Aconcagua, a Pátzcuaro, a Elqui,  
Y a mis entrañas cuando yo canto.*

*Otros olores no hay en la estancia  
Y por eso él así me ha llamado;  
Y no hay nadie tampoco en la casa  
Sino este pan abierto en un plato,  
Que con su cuerpo me reconoce  
Y con el mío yo reconozco.*

.....  
*Pan de Coquimbo, pan de Oaxaca,  
Pan de Santa Ana y de Santiago.*

*En mis infancias yo le sabía  
Forma de sol, de pez o de halo,  
.....*

*Después le olvidé, hasta este día  
En que los dos nos encontramos,  
Yo con mi cuerpo de Sara vieja  
Y él con el suyo de cinco años.*

(*"Pan"*. T, 75-76)

*Mano a mano nos tenemos,  
Como Raquel, como Rebeca.  
Yo volteo su cuerpo roto  
Y ella voltea mi guedeja,  
Y nos contamos las Antillas  
O desvariamos las Provenzas*

*Ambas éramos de las olas  
Y sus espejos de salmuera,  
Y del mar libre nos trajeron*



*A una casa profunda y quieta;  
Y el puñado de Sal y yo,  
En beguinas o en prisioneras,  
Las dos llorando, las dos cautivas,  
Atravesamos por la puerta . . .*

("Sal". T, 79-80)

*Hay países que yo recuerdo  
Como recuerdo mis infancias.  
Son países de mar o río,  
De pastales, de vegas y aguas.*  
.....

*Quiero volver a tierras niñas;  
Llévenme a un blando país de aguas.*  
.....

*Tenga una fuente por mi madre  
Y en la siesta salga a buscarla,  
Y en jarras baje de una peña  
Un agua dulce, aguda y áspera.*

("Agua". T, 81-82)

*En el llano y la llanada  
De salvia y menta salvaje,  
Encuentro como esperándome  
El Aire.*  
.....

*Cuando camino de vuelta,  
Por encinas y pinares,  
Todavía me persigue  
El Aire.*  
.....

*Al amanecer, me duermo  
—Cuando mis cabellos caen—  
Como la madre del hijo,  
Rota del Aire . . .*

("El Aire". T, 85-87)

There is nostalgia in her evoking of scenes—of games—of her childhood, and it is only through these basic, unchangeable, unfailing, tangible, *material* things that she can feel herself secure and firm in the billowy sea of doubt, of fear and of uncertainty . . .

The first section, "Muerte de mi madre", recalls, in substance, some of the well known pages of *Desolación*. But how different these poems ("La fuga", "Lápida filial", "Locas letanías . . .") from the "Nocturno", "Los sonetos de la muerte", "Interrogaciones", "La espera inútil", "La obsesión". What had been passion and tragic despair is now more often serenity and hope. She has, for the most part, discarded the ardent, impassioned tone which tragedy awakens in youth. Life has mellowed her

somewhat rude expostulations, and her prayers—no less fervent—reveal a comfort and a certainty in salvation that did not exist in the earlier book where she felt she had to *fatigue* the ear of Christ with her prayers for the redemption of the dead lover.

Her maternity now reaches unfathomed, unforeseen, prodigious depths, for it embraces all things—all people. And her protective "mother instinct" surges wild and passionate at the thought of her own mother wandering aimlessly and alone in the mystic pale of death; of Christ nailed piteously on the Cross. Her feelings for her mother, for the Father, are not "filial" then, but "maternal".<sup>1</sup> This dual parent-child, child-parent relationship which is more or less present in all forms of love, is expressed factually, in the poem "Cascada en sequedal" where she calls the water both "mother mine" and "child of mine":

*¡Agua, madre mía,  
E hija mía, el agua! (T, 84)*

But her maternal feeling is more conventionally, concretely and specifically expressed in her "Canciones de cuna":

*Duerme, mi sangre única  
Que así te doblaste,  
Vida mía, que se mece  
En rama de sangre.*

*Musgo de unos sueños míos  
Que te me cuajaste,  
Duerme así, con tus sabores  
De leche y de sangre.*

*.....*  
*Mi semillón soterado  
Que te levantaste;  
Estandarte en que se pára  
Y cae mi sangre;*

*.....*  
*En la noche, si me pierde,  
Lo trae mi sangre.  
¡Y en la noche, si lo pierdo,  
Lo hallo por su sangre! (T, 197-198)*

in the admirable poem, "La cuenta-mundo," where the mother explains to her infant child the magic and the wonder of the air, the light, the larks,

1

*Pero a veces no vas al lado mío:  
Te llevo en mí, en un peso angustioso  
Y amoroso a la vez . . . (T, 12)*

*Acaba de llegar, Cristo, a mis brazos  
Peso divino, dolor que me entregan . . . (T, 31)*

the mountain, the water, the animals, the butterflies, the fruit, the pine tree, the fire, the house, the earth . . .; and in the tender and nostalgic poem "Niño mexicano":

*Hace doce años dejé  
A mi niño mexicano;  
Pero despierta o dormida  
Yo lo peino de mis manos . . .  
¡Es una maternidad  
Que no me cansa el regazo  
Y es un éxtasis, que tengo  
De la gran muerte librado!* (T, 117-118)

*Tala* is, undoubtedly, a more objective book than the first in that it often goes beyond herself for inspiration. *Desolación* had sung of life, of death, of nature, of motherhood—all in relation to her own emotions; all facets of her own self exegesis. But in this book we see her transcend the personal and disclose "the outer world"—and especially that part of it which has always been her main concern: America. Her Americanism, in its richest and warmest sense, is patent here, not only in the section properly called "América", but in all those poems which sing, in one form or another, of its landscapes, its places, its flora, its fauna, its people, its heritage, its destiny . . . There is an attempt—an ideal—to disregard and efface national boundaries and to fuse all into that "heart-shaped" beautiful land (land of the Incas and of the Mayas, of the Quichés, the Quechuans and Aymarans) which is her America; an ardent wish to see those "downtrodden racemes of sacred vine"—which are the Indians of old—restored to their pristine destiny; and a fervent promise to abide with and restore the greatness of their heritage:

*Gentes quechuas y gentes mayas  
Te juramos lo que jurábamos.  
De ti rodamos hacia el Tiempo  
Y subiremos a tu regazo;  
De ti caímos en grumos de oro,  
En vellón de oro desgajado,  
Y a ti entraremos rectamente  
Según dijeron Incas Magos.*

*¡Como racimos al lagar  
Volveremos los que bajamos . . .* (T, 96-97)

And so in the part called "América" she essays two "hymns"<sup>1</sup> in almost epic manner: one to the tropical sun ("sol de los Incas, sol de los Mayas,

<sup>1</sup> It is time—she says, commenting upon them in the notes—that the "minor tone" which came as a violent reaction, and repugnance, to the pompous, bombastic, romantic "epic trumpet", and which is so appropriate for the singing of the intimate, simple aspects of life so dear to present-day writers in Spanish America, be discarded now in favor of the "major tone" which is needed to sing of that "formidable spectacle" which the American scene and heritage present.



maduro sol americano") and one to the Andes ("carne de piedra de América"). This natural union which the "ripe American sun" and the "stony flesh" of the Cordillera effect is what she hopes to see, in fact, in those lands which "speak the language of Saint Theresa, of Góngora and Azorín."

Not the least interesting and valuable part of the book are the "Notas" with which it ends. In them she gives "the reason" for *Tala*, elaborates on some points of her ars poetica, explains and justifies the use of particular words<sup>1</sup> and rhyme schemes,<sup>2</sup> and comments on some of the poems. She also makes interesting and characteristic references to her preferred choice of certain words of distinct rural flavor<sup>3</sup> (for to her "el pueblo" is "la mejor criatura verbal que Dios crió") and ascribes the origin of some of the archaisms<sup>4</sup> which she is fond of using, to the popular speech of her own country, rather than to the Spanish classics—as has been so frequently stated. These notes are personal, and in the best Mistralian tradition: a meaty, wholesome prose written in a homely, conversational tone.

<sup>1</sup> [*Saudade*] . . . "encabezo una sección de este libro, rematado en el dulce suelo y el dulce aire portugueses, con esta palabra *Saudade*. Ya sé que dan por equivalente de ella el *soledades* castellano. La sustitución vale para España; en América el sustantivo *soledad* no se aplica sino en su sentido inmediato, único que allá le conocemos". (T, 277).

[*Albricias*] "En el juego de las *Albricias* que yo jugaba en mis niñeces del valle de Elqui, sea porque los chilenos nos evaporamos la *s* final, sea porque las albricias eran siempre cosa en singular—un objeto escondido que se buscaba—la palabra se volvía una especie de sustantivo colectivo . . . El sentido de la palabra en la tierra mía es el de *suerte*, *hallazgo*, o *regalo*. Yo corrí tras la *albricia* en mi valle de Elqui, gritándola y viéndola en unidad. Puedo corregir en mi seso y en mi lengua lo aprendido en las edades feas—adolescencia, juventud, madurez—pero no puedo mudar de raíz las expresiones recibidas en la infancia. Aquí quedan, pues, esas albricias en singular". (T, 279).

<sup>2</sup> "Nocturno de la Consumación"—"Cuanto trabajan con la expresión rimada, más aún con la cabalmente rimada, saben que la rima, que escasea al comienzo a poco andar se viene sobre nosotros en una lluvia cerrada, entrometiéndose dentro del verso mismo, de tal manera que, en los poemas largos, ella se vuelve lo natural y no lo perseguido . . . En este momento, rechazar una rima interna llega a parecer . . . rebeldía artificiosa. Ahí he dejado varias de esas rimas internas y espontáneas. Rabie con ellas el de oído retórico, que el niño o Juan Pueblo, criaturas poéticas cabales, aceptan con gusto la infracción". (T, 274-275).

"Beber"—"Falta la rima final, para algunos oídos. En el mío, desatento y basto, la palabra esdrújula no da rima precisa ni vaga. El salto del esdrújulo deja en el aire su cabriola como una trampa que engaña al amorador del sonsonete. Este amorador, persona colectiva que fué millón, disminuye a ojos vistas, y bien se puede servirlo a medias y también dejar de servirlo . . ." (T, 277).

<sup>3</sup> "Estos Recados llevan el tono más mío, el más frecuente, mi dejo rural con el que he vivido y con el que me voy a morir". (T, 280).

<sup>4</sup> "No sólo en la escritura sino también en mi habla, dejo, por complacencia, mucha expresión arcaica, sin poner más condición al arcaísmo que la de que sea fácil y llano. Muchos, digo, y no todos los arcaísmos que me acuden y que sacrifico en obsequio de la persona anti-arcaica que va a leer. En América esta persona resulta siempre ser una capitalina. El campo americano—y en el campo yo me crié—sigue hablando su lengua nueva veteada de arcaísmos abundantes. La ciudad, lectora de libros doctos, cree que un tal repertorio arranca en mí de los clásicos ajenos, y la muy urbana se equivoca" . . . (T, 275)



## II

### ALFONSINA STORNI

*Ni cupo en otro cuerpo así pequeño  
Un alma humana de mayor terneza . . .*

Shortly after Gabriela Mistral became known through her poems of tragic accent, there appeared, this time in Argentina, another poetess of marked talent: Alfonsina Storni. With the publication, in 1916, of her book *La inquietud del rosal*, she was to initiate in her country the fruitful period of modern feminine poetry.

#### 1. LIFE

Alfonsina Storni is one of the poets who have best expressed and mirrored in their verses the spirit of the city of Buenos Aires. Yet, as Gabriela Mistral said, she gives us the surprise of having been born in Switzerland. She was, however, so young when she was taken to the Argentine—to the province of San Juan where her parents had already settled before, and where two other children had been born to them—that one cannot think of her as anything but a genuine *criolla*, in spite of her type<sup>1</sup> which could, perhaps, not belie her ancestry.

Her childhood, far from being sheltered and pampered—like Delmira Agustini's—was a sad and arduous one; for she was barely eleven when, the family's economic resources being at a very low ebb, she was forced to go out and earn a living. At thirteen she joined an itinerant theatrical company which she left after three years because, as she said, that sort of rootless existence became unbearable to her. Her spirit found itself floundering and sought more steady mooring. At sixteen, therefore, she entered a normal school in the province of Santa Fe and four years later, after many vicissitudes which neither she nor others dwell upon, she found her way to Buenos Aires with a teaching certificate—and a child: "a fruit of love, of lawless love" . . .

After several years of sterile and unsatisfying work in the commercial field, her early experience in the theatre and her natural histrionic bent

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<sup>1</sup> "Extraordinaria la cabeza por un cabello enteramente plateado. El ojo azul, la empinada nariz francesa, muy graciosa, y la piel rosada" . . . (Gabriela Mistral, in *El Mercurio*, Santiago de Chile, April 18, 1926.)—"Una nariz que salta violentamente contra el cielo; dos ojos azul pizarra; una nubecilla rubia ceniza por cabellos" . . . (Storni, "Autodemolición", in *Repertorio Americano*, San José, Costa Rica, June 7, 1930).



and ability won her several appointments to teach interpretative reading and recitation. In 1921, on the recommendation of Roberto F. Giusti and Enrique Villaroel, a position was especially created for her in the Teatro Infantil Municipal Labardén—a children's experimental theatre for which she wrote several plays: *Pedro y Pedrito*, *Blanco, negro . . . blanco . . .* and *Un sueño en el camino*.<sup>1</sup>

She had already published some poems in local reviews in the city of Rosario (province of Santa Fe) when she arrived in Buenos Aires, but she was, at most, "a vague promise"—as Giusti said—even after she had won some recognition by the appearance of *La inquietud del rosal*. And although other women also attempted to put their thoughts—or rather their *emotions*—to rhyme, it was Alfonsina who elevated feminine poetry in the Argentine from what Giusti termed the *sub-literature*, as María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira had done in Uruguay, and Gabriela Mistral in Chile.

Fated to a life of sorrow that terminated in suicide at the age of forty-six in the autumn of 1938, Alfonsina Storni pours out in her many books—for she is the most prolific poetess of all—her torments, her ideals, her disillusionments, her love . . .

Her lyre, far from being monochord—as are those of so many other poetesses of lesser, or even equal, worth—has multiple and varied tones and themes. For not only does she sing of love without "the instinctive false blushes" which have curbed so many women through the ages; not only are her verses the cry of a sensitive, intelligent woman tortured by a gnawing, unsatisfied mental anguish, beset by an elusive, yet persistent ideal, parched by a spiritual thirst which this "impoverished century" cannot allay, but she reveals an aspect until then but little known in feminine poetry: a forceful and poignant interpretation of modern city life, with its piercing loneliness, its chilling indifference, its soulless uniformity and maddening monotony, its spiritual vacuity, its unending vulgarity . . . which rots and perplexes the soul.

And this loneliness, this drabness, this crushing uniformity are reflected in the spirit of those who, like herself, form part of that "human forest" that moves along its "sad, straight, gray, identical streets." The same mathematical impersonality of the houses in rows, in angles, in squares, is reflected in their souls, in their ideas, in their very physical outlines and even—she laments—in her own tears:

*Casas enfiladas, casas enfiladas,  
Casas enfiladas.  
Cuadrados, cuadrados, cuadrados.  
Casas enfiladas.*

<sup>1</sup> She also wrote other dramatic works for children: *Los degolladores de estatuas*, published in 1932 by *La Nación*, and *El dios de los pájaros*, a fantasy in verse which was successfully produced in Buenos Aires, with music by Daniel Baretii.

*Las gentes ya tienen el alma cuadrada,  
Ideas en fila  
Y ángulo en la espalda.  
Yo misma he vertido ayer una lágrima,  
Dios mío, cuadrada<sup>1</sup> (DD,<sup>2</sup> 136).*

It has been suggested that it was probably that loneliness of spirit, that poignant, bitter desolation—so forcibly evoked and keenly analyzed by countless essayists, novelists and poets of the Argentine—that prompted three outstanding literary figures of the River Plate: Horacio Quiroga, Leopoldo Lugones and Alfonsina Storni, to take their own lives within the short period of two years. Alfonsina expresses this haunting "soledad" in several of her poems—especially in those written toward the end:

*En la ciudad, erizada de dos millones de hombres,  
No tengo un ser amado . . . (MSP, 113).*

*Podría tirar mi corazón  
Desde aquí, sobre un tejado:  
Mi corazón rodaría  
Sin ser visto.*

*Podría gritar  
Mi dolor  
Hasta partir en dos mi cuerpo;  
Sería disuelto  
Por las aguas del río.*

*Podría danzar  
Sobre la azotea  
La danza negra de la muerte:  
El viento se llevaría  
Mi danza.*

*Podría,  
Soltando la llama de mi pecho,  
Echarla a rodar  
Como los fuegos fatuos:  
Las lámparas eléctricas  
La apagarían . . . ("Soledad", MSP, 133-134).*

<sup>1</sup> Fernández Moreno has a poem in similar vein:

*Tengo el cerebro cuadrículado  
Como tus calles ¡Oh Buenos Aires!  
En mi cerebro no hay callejuelas  
El sol alumbra, circula el aire.*

*Si me preguntas por qué mis versos  
Son tan precisos, tan regulares,  
Yo diré a todos que aprendí a hacerlos  
Sobre la geometría de tus calles.*

("Compenetración")

<sup>2</sup> The following abbreviations will be used in quoting from Alfonsina Storni's books, all published in Buenos Aires: IR: *La inquietud del rosal*, 1916; DD: *El dulce daño*, 2nd edition, 1920; I: *Irremediabilmente*, 1919; L: *Languidez*, 1920; O: *Ocre*, 1925; MSP: *Mundo de siete pozos*, 1934; MT: *Mascarilla y trébol*, 1938; AP: *Antología poética*, 1938.

At the deaths of Quiroga and of Lugones many of the outstanding writers of Spanish America dedicated pages in prose and verse to their memory. Alfonsina paid touching tribute to both. In her poem, "A Horacio Quiroga",<sup>1</sup> she tends to condone and sanction his act rather than censure it—for she knew that fear rots more efficaciously than death:

*Morir como tú, Horacio, en tus cabales,  
Y así como en tus cuentos, no está mal;  
Un rayo a tiempo y se acabó la feria . . .  
Allá dirán . . .*

*No se vive en la selva impunemente,  
Ni cara al Paraná.  
Bien por tu mano firme, gran Horacio . . .  
Allá dirán.*

*"Nos hiere cada hora—queda escrito—  
Nos mata la final".  
Unos minutos menos . . . ¿quién te acusa?  
Allá dirán.*

*Más pudre el miedo, Horacio, que la muerte  
Que a las espaldas va.  
Bebiste bien, que luego sonreías . . .  
Allá dirán.*

*Sé que la mano obrera te estrecharon,  
Mas no, sí, Alguno, o simplemente Pan,  
Que no es de fuertes renegar de su obra . . .  
(Más que tú mismo es fuerte quien dirá) (AP, 169)*

And in the lines which she inscribed to the memory of Leopoldo Lugones<sup>2</sup> she seems to understand, too well, the drama that prompted him to take his life: "a drama which touches us all"—she says—"for it is that of a writer wrapped in a net which can smother us, *which is probably smothering us*" . . .

She herself had often meditated death, and, strangely enough, especially in her later poems, the idea of it is constantly associated with the sea—for the sea meant liberation, space, infinity . . . "Life is a cave," she once wrote, and "death is space." And because the city, like life, like the universe, was a cavern, a cage to her spirit, she loved the boundless span of the sea. For it must have been to her a momentary relief from the crushing sameness of those "houses in rows, houses in rows, houses in rows." It must have been, as she said, like a refreshing "pampa of water" after that impenetrable "forest of houses" . . .

But the attraction is magnetic, and one day "the green flesh of the

<sup>1</sup> *Nosotros*, Buenos Aires, 1937, III, p. 322.

<sup>2</sup> *Nosotros*, Buenos Aires, 1938, VII, 218-221.



sea"<sup>1</sup> makes her its own. Plagued by an incurable illness, and sick and lonely in spirit, she refused to go on suffering.<sup>2</sup> And so, early on a cloudless October morning, she finally resolved to wander down into that "crystal house" at the bottom of the sea where she would be lulled by "the green music of the waters" . . . A day before her death she had sent a poem to *La Nación* which serenely told of her intent to seek repose in that green, lethal haven:

"Voy a dormir"

*Dientes de flores, cofia de rocío,  
Manos de hierbas, tú, nodriza fina,  
Tenme prestas las sábanas terrosas  
Y el edredón de musgos escardados.*

*Voy a dormir, nodriza mía, acuéstame,  
Ponme una lámpara a la cabecera;  
Una constelación; la que te guste;  
Todas son buenas; bájala un poquito.*

*Déjame sola: oyes romper los brotes . . .  
Te acuna un pie celeste desde arriba  
Y un pájaro te traza unos compases*

*Para que olvides . . . Gracias . . . Ah, un encargo:  
Si él llama nuevamente por teléfono  
Le dices que no insista, que he salido . . .*

"I have the presentiment that I am to live but a short time," she had said in an early book; and it was not long after that she wrote her lyric epitaph:

*Aquí descanso yo: dice "Alfonsina"  
El epitafio claro al que se inclina.  
Aquí descanso yo, y en este pozo,  
Porque no siento, me solazo y gozo.*

("Epitafio para mi tumba", O, 111)

for she was "the sad woman" to whom Charon had already shown his oar. She knew that from birth one's heart must begin its grim rehearsal—because "the art of dying is an arduous one" . . .

1 . . . carne verde del mar,  
Por tus carreteras húmedas  
Hube de andar.

.....  
Mi cuerpo quería echar raíces,  
Raíces verdes en la carne del mar (MSP, 85-86)

2 Enferma de algún mal que no se cura  
La muerte debe ser la salvación . . . (IR, 78)

## 2. WORKS

Written under the fast-declining light of "the last gleams of Rubén Darío",<sup>1</sup> and sounding still the familiar and distant echoes of a Romanticism long eschewed by more expert, pliant and alert hands and minds, her first book, *La inquietud del rosal* (1916),—however many its deficiencies of form, style, and even content—opened heretofore difficult, or forbidding literary doors to women in the Argentine, and revealed a spirit unafraid, undaunted by the many prejudices which the free expression of feminine sufferings, yearnings, feelings still evoked. For when her book was published in Buenos Aires, people looked upon a woman who dared publicly to reveal intimate thoughts, intimate longings, as somewhat of a *déclassée*. In Alfonsina's case there were no attenuating circumstances. And as she frequented gatherings of the then prominent—and promising—writers, at a time when it was not customary, nor considered proper for a woman to form part of these literary circles,<sup>2</sup> criticism was rife and acute. But Alfonsina was daring in art, as she had been in life . . .

And so even when people were being regaled with such works as Gálvez' *La maestra normal*, Lugones' *El payador*, Hugo Wast's *La casa de los cuervos*, Rojas' *La argentinidad*, Capdevila's *La sulamita*, Lynch's *Los caranchos de la Florida*, and Fernández Moreno's *Intermedio provinciano*—all published in 1916—her book had resonance, mainly because of what was then termed its audacity, and the author's self depiction in verses that sounded a new note—the *feminine* note—among the Lugones, the Larretas, the Quirogas, the Ugartes, the Gálvez . . . This book of uneven and relative merit whose poems, according to Giusti,<sup>3</sup> were "palotes rimados, trazados sobre la falsilla de todas las escuelas poéticas que se han sucedido desde las guzlas románticas hasta los cisnes decadentes" was, subsequently, virtually disowned by its author; it was never reprinted (although the edition was soon exhausted), and, what is more significant, no poem from it was included in Alfonsina's personally supervised and rich *Antología poética*. It served, at best, merely to reflect, as does its title, that restlessness<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Cuando empecé a escribir se advertían los últimos resplandores de Rubén Darío." (Alfonsina Storni, in *Nosotros*, Buenos Aires, 1932, LXXVI, p. 158).

<sup>2</sup> "Las mujeres todavía no concurrían a los banquetes" (*Ibid.*).

<sup>3</sup> *Literatura y vida*, Buenos Aires, 1939, p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> She alludes repeatedly to her "neurastenia", "inquietud", "nervios", "histeria":

*Como la neurastenia jugaba en mi ilusión.*

*Después mi mano inquieta todo lo revolvió* (p. 60)

*. . . nervios de inquietud exquisita . . .* (p. 68)

*Se me tornan los nervios hilos electrizados . . .*

*Y bajo la presión de finísima histeria* (p. 72)

*Mis nervios están locos* (p. 13)

—emotional and intellectual—so characteristic of her throughout her life. But as a work it is an isolated, sterile phase and does not bear any appreciable relation to her future and more personal production.

Other books followed with astonishing rapidity and fecundity: *El dulce daño* (1918), *Irremediablemente* (1919), *Languidez* (1920)—books which profiled and defined in each successive phase her many-faceted poetic personality, her indubitable talent, her keen mind. They were also the only means by which one could peer, at times, into her somewhat veiled life. "I am a naked soul in these verses", she said in *Irremediablemente*, and spoke of having imprisoned in her pen vibrant moments of her life. Written when *el dulce daño*—that "sweet torture" that was love—sounded the dominant note in her spirit; when she found sorrow and life irrevocably, *irremediably*, linked in her being; when she resigned herself, at times with indifference, at times with spiritual and moral *languidness*, to the relentless Nemesis which hounded her, these books comprise a definite and distinct phase in her poetic evolution.

*El dulce daño*, engendered in a far from happy mood:

*Hice el libro así:*

*Gimiendo, llorando, soñando, ay de mí . . .* (DD, 9)

seems to cull happiness only from the past. Its last part, called "Hielo," reflects a mood that in time becomes characteristic: an ironic, pseudo-supercilious mood, in which she adopts an antagonistic, defiant and superior tone which people driven from the social pale so often assume. Life, with its tumult and its weariness, makes her sometimes long for the eternal silence, for the quieting sleep of death. And she feels weighed down by thought, oppressed by consciousness, overwrought by emotion. "Oh, how lovely, how lovely, not to feel . . . not to know of one's self," she says in "Nocturno." She yearns to be inanimate—without a heart, without a soul.

She knows the frailties of woman, her whims, her caprices; yet she feels very strongly against two distinct moral codes—one for man, and one for woman. "Only when *you* have cleansed *your* soul of all carnal impurities"—she says to the man—"demand that *I* be white, that *I* be pure, that *I* be chaste" . . . Death stalks through some of these lines, but not yet with the intensity that it assumes in later books. And the city appears with its geometric and precise contours in poems like "Cuadrados y ángulos" and "Aspecto."

*Irremediablemente* recaptures "humble, amorous, passionate" mo-

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*Yo estaba herida de inquietud que mata,  
Una inquietud nerviosa y agorera . . .* (p. 28).

*. . . donde yo he botado neurasténicamente*

*Librándole mezquina de mis manos nerviosas* (p. 57).

*Había llorado mucho y sin saber por qué . . .  
Estaba neurasténica, cansada, no sé . . .* (p. 59).



ments of her life—as the sub-sections indicate—as well as “bitter, sylvan and tempestuous” ones. “This book is a child of a moment of great spiritual stress”—reads the colophon— “and was written in two months: January and February of 1919.”

The two initial poems, “Este libro” and “Alma desnuda”—which serve as preamble—bespeak the sincerity of the verses that follow:

*Me vienen estas cosas del fondo de la vida* (I, 7)

*Momentos de la vida aprisionó mi pluma* (I, 7)

*Soy un alma desnuda en estos versos* (I, 9)

The second poem graphically depicts her soul: a brave and dauntless one, a willing soul—sensitive, humble, restless, idealistic . . .

With a plea to man to understand her suffering, her *madness*, she recounts the multiple phases of her love:

*Seré en tus manos una copa fina  
Pronta a sonar cuando vibrarla quieras . . .* (I, 29)

*Yo seré a tu lado silencio, silencio,  
Perfume, perfume, no sabré pensar,  
No tendré palabras, no tendré deseos,  
Sólo sabré amar* (I, 47)

*Te ando buscando amor que nunca llegas,  
Te ando buscando amor que te mezquinas . . .* (I, 99)

*Fiero amor: soy pequeña como un copo de nieve,  
Fiero amor: soy pequeña como un pájaro breve,  
Triste como el gemido de un niño moribundo,  
Fiero amor, no hallarás mejor presa en el mundo* (I, 113)

*He amado hasta llorar, hasta morirme,  
Amé hasta odiar, amé hasta la locura . . .* (I, 129)

*Así, como jugando, te acerqué el corazón  
Hace ya mucho tiempo, en una primavera . . .  
Pero tú, indiferente, pasaste por mi vera . . .* (I, 141)

But man remains adamant and so, in a biting poem called “Hombre pequeño”, she asks him to free her—the bird—caught in his guileful and deceiving cage:

*Hombre pequeño, hombre pequeño,  
Suelta a tu canario que quiere volar . . .* (I, 93)

Her “fight for freedom” rather than individual is collective. She feels that in liberating herself she is freeing all women from the “ancestral weight” of prejudice; for she has dared to unseal her lips and declare her desire openly—although, like Prometheus, she too had been “bound”:

*Para decirte, amor, que te deseo,  
Sin los rubores falsos del instinto,  
Estuve atada como Prometeo,  
Pero una tarde me salí del cinto* (I, 109)

*Languidez* sets its tone in its dedicatory note: "To those who, like myself, have never fulfilled a single one of their dreams." The discontent and dissatisfaction apparent in so many of her previous poems are even more evident and poignant now when she feels impotent to break from "the prison of the senses" that enslaves her; when she sees herself "consumed" in life within the four symmetrical walls of her house, and her love wasting away in useless and fruitless waiting; when she realizes that she has not yet said "the best" that is within her, and wonders if ever—in prose or verse—she will be able to "extract" it . . .

Life costs much pain—she has learned—, much weariness. And she is surfeited with suffering; for her breast has been a propitious target for all the arrows of pain—perhaps because it is so "white," so "docile," so "inoffensive." She looks deeper within now and pries curiously at her soul that sleeps that "larga siesta de víbora". And her spirit is pitilessly immersed in the abysmal depths of her solitude . . .

"The poetry which I shall write in the future will be of another type"—she announced in *Languidez*—; "this collection initiates in part my abandonment of the subjective type of poetry which cannot be continued when the soul has said, in respect to itself, all that it had to say." *Ocre* (1925) which reveals greater maturity of mind, of concept, and more conscious form and style, heads the literary phase which, according to her own admission, she prefers.

In this book she is more bitter, yet more resigned to the poverty of her spiritual and amorous life. Her taunts at man are more caustic; her attitude more ironic. Her spirit, with the vintage of experience, has assumed the *ocher* or faded tone of aridity rather than the honeyed and mellow one of fruitfulness. Her laughter is more raucous and rings less true.

She takes whatever love—whatever life—is meted out to her, with spiritual and moral listlessness, for she is weary of hoping and of waiting . . . She knows man to be faithless, vain, selfish, yet she continues to be cognizant of the power he has over her—for she cannot free herself from the need of that "rey devorante." But, rather than with resignation, she meets failure with cynicism, with irony, or with feigned indifference. She who had been already born "wise"—without innocence or purity; she who had so early learned "the science of weeping," knows life well—she says—and does not ask for "the impossible."

One year later (1926) she published *Poemas de amor*, which never enjoyed the popularity of her other books and which was sentimentally defined by the poetess as "una de las tantas lágrimas caídas de los ojos

humanos" . . . Almost eight years elapsed before the publication, in 1934, of *Mundo de siete pozos*—poems in "the new manner" which achieve a form polished and succinct and ingenious imagery, and which mark the beginning of a strange, new and bitter phase.

There seems now to be a depuration of certain familiar themes, and an exclusion of others. Those that persist with more trenchant contours are the city, and death—constantly associated in this prophetic book of hers with the sea. The style follows more closely the patterns of the times. She abandons rhyme and seeks expression in free verse and in a form scintillating with images—not always equally inspired.

This "world of seven wells"—as she explains in the initial poem (pp. 9-11)—is the human head, which holds the wonder of the *eyes*, "like seas upon the earth":

*Desde el núcleo  
En mareas  
Absolutas y azules,  
Asciende el agua de la mirada  
Y abre las suaves puertas  
De los ojos  
Como mares en la tierra.*

*. . . tan quietas  
Esas mansas aguas de Dios  
que sobre ellas  
Mariposas e insectos de oro  
se balancean . . .*

the *ears*—wells of sound; snails of mother-of-pearl wherein resounds the spoken and the unuttered word:

*Y las otras dos puertas:  
Las antenas acurrucadas  
En las catacumbas que inician las orejas;  
Pozos de sonidos,  
Caracoles de nácar donde resuena  
La palabra expresada  
Y la no expresa;  
Tubos colocados a derecha e izquierda  
Para que el mar no calle nunca,  
Y el ala mecánica de los mundos  
Rumorosa sea . . .*

the *nose*—that mountain raised above the equatorial line of the head; those two doors that foretaste "the fragrant serpentine of spring":

*Y la montaña alzada  
Sobre la línea ecuatorial de la cabeza:  
La nariz de batientes de cera  
Por donde comienza  
A callarse el color de la vida;*



*Las dos puertas  
 Por donde adelanta  
 —Flores, ramas y frutas—  
 La serpentina olorosa de la primavera . . .*

the *mouth*—that crater which vomits forth the sulphur of violent words and the dense smoke that issues from the heart and its tempest:

*Y el cráter de la boca  
 De bordes ardidios  
 Y paredes calcinadas y reseca;  
 El cráter que arroja  
 El azufre de las palabras violentas,  
 El humo denso que viene  
 Del corazón y su tormenta;  
 La puerta  
 En corales labrada suntuosos  
 Por donde engulle la bestia,  
 Y el ángel canta y sonríe  
 Y el volcán humano desconcierta.*

Some poems, like "Uno" (p. 81), again evince that admiration and cult—that strong desire—for the masculine physique and strength that recurs throughout her poems:

*Los anchos hombros, su brazada heroica  
 De nadador . . . . . el pétreo torso . . .  
 Desde mi asiento, inexpresiva espío,  
 Sin mirar casi, su perfil de cobre.  
 ¿Me siente acaso? ¿Sabe que está sobre  
 Su tenso cuello este deseo mío  
 De deslizar la mano suavemente  
 Por el hombro potente?*

And although she can already discern the "black flocks" of death in the horizon, she still expresses the hope of finding the ideal lover:

*Pero, encontrar un día el espíritu sumo,  
 La condición divina en el pecho de un fuerte,  
 El hombre en cuya llama quisieras deshacerte  
 Como al golpe de viento las columnas de humo!*

*La mano que al posarse, grave, sobre tu espalda,  
 Haga noble tu pecho, generosa tu falda,  
 Y más hondos los surcos creadores de tus sesos.*

*Y la mirada grande, que mientras te ilumine,  
 Te encienda al rojoblanco, y te arda, y te calcine  
 Hasta el seco ramaje de los pálidos huesos! ("Pasión", p. 141)*

Never a poetess of joy and laughter, Alfonsina sinks still deeper into the bitter waters of sadness and hopelessness. The world is sour—she has learned—immature and stunted; sour is the sun above it; sour the moon;

sour the wind; sour is man upon the earth. She feels that she is nailed on the cross of Time, while on her eyelids there "grows" a tear far older than her body. Her heart dances on the whirling tip of a whip. And as she drags the "sad and solitary isle" of her body, her miserable and weary flesh, her eyes—beacons of anguish—behold a dreary and defeated landscape of gray skies, deserted seas, lost comets, broken stars, a "faded" moon, dead insects . . . She herself is but the vestment of a moan; her body drab and dry, her hands already dead for human caresses, her heart "a dead point" nailed on a black rock—incessantly pecked at by the raven of pain, but which no longer bleeds . . .

If in other books she spoke of the sea, it seemed to be in a somewhat casual manner. Not so here where the sea and the thought of finding peace in its icy, turbulent depths, become almost an obsession:

*Escalinatas lentas  
Descienden al agua  
Y llegan, desvanecidas,  
A mis pies.*

*Por ellas  
Ascenderé  
Un día  
Hasta internarme  
Más allá del horizonte.*

*Paredes de agua  
Me harán cortejo  
En la tarde  
Resplandeciente.*

("Crepúsculo", p. 38) .

*Esponja del cielo,  
Carne verde del mar,  
Por tus carreteras húmedas  
Hube de andar.*

.....  
*Mi cuerpo quería echar raíces,  
Raíces verdes en la carne del mar.*

("Círculos sin centro", p. 85)

*. . . mi cuerpo,  
Pardo y seco,  
Clavado en la fría  
Flor del mar . . .*

("Luna de Marzo sobre el mar", p. 88)

*Cálida, morada, viva,  
La carne fría del mar.  
Para mi carne  
Que se acaba  
Su terciopelo  
De coral . . .*

("Trópico", p. 101)

And that world of seven wells—of seven doors—which is her head, registers all the emotions of city-life. Seldom has the city inspired more tortured, impassioned, tragic poems than those she calls "Vaticinio," "Imagen," "Momento," "Calle," "Plaza de invierno," "Selvas de ciudad," "La hora 19," "Una paloma," "Hombres en la ciudad," "Llovizna," "Torre," "Buques," "Soledad" . . .

The book closes with a group of sonnets and ends, appropriately, with the dolorous "Landscape of a dead love" which leaves no doubt that even then her tongue was savoring the black taste of death:

*Ya te hundes, sol; mis aguas se coloran  
De llamaradas por morir; ya cae  
Mi corazón desenhelado, y trae,  
La moche, filos que en el viento lloran.*

*Ya en opacas orillas se avizoran  
Manadas negras; ya mi lengua atrae  
Betún de muerte; y ya no se distrae  
De mí, la espina; y sombras me devoran.*

*Pellejo muerto, el sol, se tumba al cabo.  
Como un perro girando sobre el rabo,  
La tierra se echa a descansar, cansada.*

*Mano huesosa apaga los luceros:  
Chirrían por sus lóbregos senderos  
Con la pupila negra y descarnada.*

("Paisaje del amor muerto", p. 155)

Her books, like her life, became progressively more bitter; and *Mascarilla y trébol* (*Círculos inmantados*), her last book, published but shortly before her death (1938),<sup>1</sup> marks the high point in this route of grief which she was fated to traverse. This book is saturated with the brine of the sea which now, rather than an objective reality, becomes almost an integral, an intimate part of her; and with the turbid waters of that other sea—the disconsolate sea of woe, of discontent and tears—that lies, always agitated, within her. It is formed by what she terms *antisonetos*,<sup>2</sup> and is preceded by a "brief explanation" which she deemed necessary; for from the opinions called forth by some of the poems which had previously appeared in newspapers and magazines, she foresaw that the book would be "branded as obscure." The key to "this relatively new lyric tendency," she states, should be looked for in those "fundamental psychic changes that have operated in me," and not in "external currents of my true personality." She then calls upon the reader's imaginative and creative collaboration, and tells us that these sonnets have sprung "vitally" from her—in content and form—while she was almost in a state of trance;

<sup>1</sup> The same year—although already posthumously—there appeared her very complete and revealing *Antología poética* which seemed to be an appropriate and epitomic end to her prolific poetic cycle.

<sup>2</sup> . . . "los que ella llamaba sus 'antisonetos', y yo diría 'casi-sonetos', pues no son sino los catorce clásicos versos, pero sin rima". (Giusti, *op. cit.*, p. 119).



that she wrote the majority of them in pencil, rapidly, in a public place, in a moving vehicle, in wakeful moments in bed, but spent months in polishing them.

She looks beyond this world—into that “trasmundo” that harbors unspoken thoughts and visions or *sugestiones* that become potently real; for, as she says, he is now traveling, rolling “loosely” over the beaches and the seas of dreams. And her imagination conjures up weird images: that of a man with a head hugely out of proportion; or of a dead child that goes along, pensive, on feet of clover. “El mirasol”—the sunflower—is a typical poem of this distorted and distressed state of mind:

*Le vi en un sueño antes de aquí, golpeando  
Su cara roma en el perfil del viento,  
En una procesión de unos gigantes,  
En carnaval de plantas trasnochadas.*

*Venía a ritmo de oso, mofletudo,  
Un paso atrás, el otro hacia adelante,  
Y el delgaducho vientre le reía  
De soportar un sol sin sus farolas.*

*Pasó a mi lado entre pomposas lanzas  
Cayendo al golpe del libado vino  
E inhábil para alzarse en frase alguna.*

*Lo encuentro aquí contándole a las berzas  
Su aventura burguesa de mi sueño  
Y fofo adulador del astro de oro.*

And yet, in Alfonsina's words: “todo tiene aquí un sentido, una lógica”.

In *Mundo de siete pozos* there were poems where one saw a premeditated disjunction of elements for a better and more minute analysis. This is clearly illustrated in “Mundo de siete pozos”, “Retrato de García Lorca”, “Retrato de un muchacho que se llama Sigfrido” and “Ecuación”, where man in general—or a specific man—rather than as an entity, is seen as a component of his various physical features: head, hair, face, forehead, eyes, eyebrows, ears, nose, cheeks, mouth, lips, tongue, neck, throat, shoulders, arms, hands, waist, legs—and even heart, soul and voice.

This process becomes far more refined and labored in her last book where she attempts to view “the detail as if it were an independent organism” personified. Thus, she elaborates on a tear (“Una lágrima”), an ear (“Una oreja”), a tooth (“Un diente”), a pencil (“Un lápiz”)—a *micro-world*, as she calls it, pregnant with compressed thought—not always within facile comprehension—that in the opinion of the poetess, could be equivalent to “those novels . . . which unfold themselves, in a few hours, in the reader's imagination.”

## 3. THEMES

Alfonsina Storni's feelings concerning death—and life—vary with her moods, as they do in everyone. At times sorrow, grief, pain, make her long to be wrapped in the soothing cloak of oblivion which death alone can furnish. But at others, less frequent, when hope and joy dispel these dismal shadows, she urges the lover to stay death's avid hand; to tell him not to keep her from gathering the fragrant flowers of love and life.

She calls death "just" and "fair" and "kind," and speaks of its ineffable sweetness with which our impure life can never vie—and of its "freedom." In contrast she laments the bitterness of life and its restrictions. "I want to forget I am alive," she says in a moment of despair. Yet in spite of its being "bad," life is also "divine" and "sweet":

. . . *Oh vida mala*  
*Y divina, y terrible y dulce . . .* (O, 85)

And so like "the young man called Siegfried"—in one of her poems—she has but one desire: *to die*; and but one hope: *not to die*.

Yet she well knows that the "Destructive Form" which devours all will someday efface her figure from the earth, and cast her into the well of oblivion. This feeling of the transitory nature of all things often takes possession of her; and so she longs, in the lover's arms, to forget that she is, after all, but a bit of mire:

*Háblame, amor, arrúllame, dame el mejor apodo,*  
*Besa mis pobres manos, acaricia la fina*  
*Mata de mis cabellos, y olvidaré, mezquina,*  
*Que soy, oh cielo eterno, sólo un poco de lodo* (I, 24)

But she versifies and rationalizes her grief, her longings, and her fears as she does her passion, and thanks nature for the "supreme gift" of poetry with which she graced her. "What would my life be"—she asks—"without the sweet word?":

*Naturaleza: gracias por este don supremo*  
*Del verso que me diste;*

. . . . .  
*¿Qué fuera de mi vida sin la dulce palabra?* (O, 105)

She feels herself crushed and soiled in the midst of the vulgarity which surrounds her.<sup>1</sup> And even as her eyes had longed to satiate their thirst for space in the boundless horizon of the sea, so her spirit cries out for freshness, for purity, for renascence—or for a love capable of "renovating" and "redeeming" her:

*Vulgaridad, vulgaridad me acosa . . .* (I, 154)

*Tener el alma fresca, limpia, ser como el lino  
Que es blanco y buele a hierbas (DD, 65)*

*Yo quiero, Dios de dioses, que me hagan nueva toda.  
Que me tejan con lirios; me sometan a poda  
Las manos del Misterio; que me resten maleza (DD, 67)*

*Pero yo espero algún amor-natura  
Capaz de renovarme y redimirme (I, 129)*

She who had been but a fragile puppet rudely flung on the inclement and wild sea of restlessness, longs for "the swallows of eternal quietude" and for a life with "a rhythm of silk"; for sweetness, and more sweetness, and for the soothing serenity of an afternoon "delicious with sunshine"; for a piece of sky that "tangles itself in the tendrils of the soul":

.....¡Clamo por vida nueva!  
*Una vida que sea como un ritmo de seda!*

*¡Dulzura y más dulzura! La quietud de una tarde  
Deliciosa de sol, la casita con piedras  
Y un pedazo de cielo que en el alma se enreda.*

.....  
*Tener las golondrinas de una quietud eterna . . .*  
(*"Resurgir"*, IR, 20)

She aspires to cross life with soaring wings<sup>1</sup>—wings in soul, in body, and in thought. And so she seeks free skies, unhampered paths, and "lo que no se rige/por orden expreso". For she abhors regimentation—preconceived ruling—of any kind: celestial or human. There is in her, therefore, a constant longing—a need—for liberation: moral, social, spiritual; an open rebellion against the restricting, and oftentimes strangling bonds of convention, her sex, life.

In *La inquietud del rosal* and other early books she flaunts her daring in breaking away from "the herd"; her indifference, her independence, in the face of those who "laugh and point." And one can sense a challenge—born of hurt pride and bravado—in her cry:

*Yo tengo un hijo fruto del amor, amor sin ley*  
.....

*Mirad cómo se ríen y cómo me señalan.*

*Y soy como la loba. Ando sola y me río  
Del rebaño. El sustento me lo gano y es mío  
Dondequiera que sea, que yo tengo una mano  
Que sabe trabajar y un cerebro que es sano.  
El hijo y después yo, y después . . . ¡lo que sea! (IR)*

*Oveja descarriada, dijeron por ahí.  
Oveja descarriada. Los hombros encogí (DD, 134)*

1

*Ir cruzando la vida con alas en el alma,  
Con alas en el cuerpo, con alas en la idea . . . (IR, 20)*



But this bitter, caustic attitude may have been dictated, rather than by her rebelliousness of spirit, by the circumstance that her moral transgression—"yo tengo un hijo fruto del amor, amor sin ley"—was not condoned. Society did not forget—nor forgive—the straying of this (was it *wilful*?) "oveja descarriada".

She feels alone against the world because she knows it to be hostile. It is formed, for the most part, by that "gente recortada y vacía" in whose vulgar midst she feels an aloof outcast. And, sensing the spiritual chasm that separates her life from theirs, she scoffs at this lack of understanding on the part of those apathetic little people ("apáticas gentullas") who know nothing of that "fever of idealism" that fills her. She finds a certain satisfaction in knowing that they find her and her actions strange:

*¿Qué diría la gente, recortada y vacía,  
Si en un día fortuito, por extra fantasía,  
Me tiñera el cabello de plateado y violeta,  
Usara peplo griego, cambiara la peineta  
Por cintillo de flores: misotis o jazmines,  
Cantara por las calles al compás de violines,  
O dijera mis versos recorriendo las plazas  
Libertado mi gusto de vulgares mordazas?*

*¿Irían a mirarme cubriendo las aceras?  
¿Me quemarían como quemaron hechiceras?  
¿Campanas tocarían para llamar a misa?*

*En verdad que pensarlo me da un poco de risa (DD, 122)*

*Subí, subí, subí. Ya estaba bien arriba  
Cuando sentí un murmullo. ¿Era reto, diatriba?  
Escuché: carcajadas, ironías, insultos.  
¿Qué os parezco una simia? Oh mis buenos estultos:  
¿Sabéis de cosas bellas?*

*Yo hace siglos que vivo trenza que trenza estrellas (DD, 142)*

But more poignant than the poems that speak of feeling misunderstood by the people in general are those which, like "Hombre pequeñito", bemoan a lack of understanding on the part of that "little man"—"little" in spirit, in moral worth—that fills her verses. It is, therefore, an unsatisfied love of which she sings: all suffering and yearning; never the joy of fulfillment one finds in Juana de Ibarbourou, for instance. For Alfonsina, like Delmira Agustini, like countless others, wanted a love such as no one could ever dream of; a love that would be all of life, all poetry:

*Soñé un amor como jamás pudiera  
Soñarlo nadie, algún amor que fuera  
La vida toda, toda la poesía (L, 89)*

But winter passed, and spring; and summer came again, and autumn. And she, alas! still waited:

*Y pasaba el invierno y no venía,  
Y pasaba también la primavera,  
Y el verano de nuevo persistía,  
Y el otoño me hallaba con mi espera* (L, 89)

And when, with anguish, she becomes aware of the bitter reality that "the hour"—that ripeness of youth of which Juana de Ibarbourou sings—is passing, and that the afternoon of life is already upon her, she laments having wasted and spent that passion of hers, so ardent, so unbridled, in the fervent but fruitless pages of her verse:

*Que está la tarde ya sobre mi vida,  
Y esta pasión ardiente y desmedida  
La he perdido, Señor, haciendo versos!* (L, 90)

Long ago she had hopefully awaited "the one." Yet even when the joy and fire of spring were with her, she sensed and feared its brevity ("si me sé lo breve de la primavera"). For she knew spring to be "a fugitive and furtive gazelle"; and therefore she urged the lover to fly to her when she saw its prelude in the first butterflies flitting over the roses in her garden. But "the lover" does not heed the call—nor the invitation: "El lecho mío es blanco/y es Primavera" . . . It is a pity, she bewails, so much spring that there is no cup from which to drink it; so much spring that there is no flame in which to burn it!

But she had been "born for love" and, in her untiring search, she must have more than once surrendered to its tempestuousness. And although she loved—she says—until she wept, and unto death; although she loved until it turned to hate, and unto madness . . . she found "all love was meager." For she who gave her heart as does a flowing fount its water—without reserve; she who had offered it pure—ere other hands had plucked its tempting fruit—found herself frozen in the icy breath of man's egotism . . .

In *Mascarilla y trébol*, her last book, she takes vengeance on the mocking Eros; she seizes him by the neck, and tearing him apart she finds the deceiving trap which had so long ensnared her—Sex:

*He aquí que te cacé por el pescuezo  
A la orilla del mar, mientras movías  
Las flechas de tu aljaba para herirme  
Y vi en el suelo tu floreal corona.*

*Como a muñeco destripé tu vientre  
Y examiné sus ruedas engañosas  
Y muy envuelta en sus poleas de oro  
Hallé una trampa que decía: sexo.*

*Sobre la playa, ya un guñapo triste,  
Te mostré al sol, buscón de tus hazañas,  
Ante un corro asustado de sirenas.*

*Iba subiendo por la cuesta albina  
 Tu madrina de engaños, Doña Luna,  
 Y te arrojé a la boca de las olas.*  
 ("A Eros")

And because in all—save in death—she met frustration, one senses a constant dissatisfaction in her; a feeling of "incompleteness" in life, in love, and in all things:

*Yo soy la que incompleta  
 Vive siempre su vida . . . (O, 34)*  
*. . . que todo a medias se te dió en la vida . . .*

for her desires always transcended their realization:

*Preparé un himno y se murió en gorgéo,  
 Me eché a ser río y terminé canal (AP, 15)*  
*El amor nuestro pudo ser una aurora  
 Y sólo fué un poniente triste y sombrío (I, 132).*

Man is the ever-recurring theme of her poems, for he constitutes the constant "problem" in her femininity. And when she finds that neither "fervent breath" nor "yielding kiss" can penetrate the iron cast of his egotism, she masks her pain in irony and scorn. Still, in her verses, he is most often the object of her desire; and it is only when this desire of hers is thwarted because of his indifference, or when her pride is hurt because of his egotism, that she descends upon him with all the strength of her irony. Her scorn of man, therefore, is not that of a woman who is above temptation, and will not succumb to the pleasures which he seeks, but that of one who has yielded, yet does not feel spiritually satisfied.

She alludes, repeatedly, to their different approach to love. Man looks for "a bit of a feast in woman" and is not repelled by coldness or indifference. Woman, on the other hand—if Alfonsina is typical—has need of the warmth which only soul-inspired love can give. And although she herself is not wholly exempt from carnal desires—being, like all, "una pobre mezcla de lo divino, al fin, y lo bestial"—her idea of love was far from festive.

Like many intellectual women, she feels superior to the average run of men who surround her<sup>1</sup> and is humiliated when man seeks in her merely what he can find in any other woman. She realizes, bitterly, that "the women of intellect are the losers in matters of love." All this, however, does not make her shun "el dulce daño". Her idealism yields to the

<sup>1</sup> "Soy superior al término medio de los hombres que me rodean, y físicamente, como mujer, soy su esclava, su molde, su arcilla. No puedo amarlo libremente: hay demasiado orgullo en mí para someterme. Me faltan medios físicos para someterlo". (Part of a letter written by the poetess to R. Brenes Mesén, and published in *Revista Iberoamericana*, Mexico, 1939, I, no. 1, p. 14).



lure of the "somber man"—he of the strong hands with the hardness of steel—even though she laments:

*Yo te pedía el cielo, me diste tierra,  
Yo te pedía estrellas, me diste besos . . .* (I, 132)

She who had wanted a "ferocious love of claw and tooth"—a love that would be like a tempest; she who had wanted to be held in a tireless grip by hands of steel; she who told "Fierce love" that there was no better prey (than she) in the world, often only found an emotional outlet and "escape" in those burning poems of hers—daring poems which caused critics to remark that here was a woman who would doubtless envy the fate of Europa,<sup>1</sup> or that hers was a muse that did not know how to tighten her stays.<sup>2</sup>

And yet her poems which appear, at times, so much to stress the carnal ways of love, seem to clamor still louder for the soul. "Give me your soul to kiss!"—she writes in one; "give me all your soul," in another. And in a touching one called "Alms" ("Limosna") she begs for a soul in exchange for her life!

Alfonsina Storni is the only one of these major poetesses who has in any way carried the feminist banner. She is the only one who has essayed the *woman-theme* in poems which sing of the bitterness that has been woman's lot since time immemorial ("Peso ancestral"); of the injustice of the "double standard" ("Tú me quieres blanca"); and, finally, of her own rebellion against the chains of convention and those "false blushes" which had so long kept women from openly revealing that surging "hidden sea" they have within.

Yet she who oftentimes speaks of love with cynicism and with irony as when, in a mood that recalls one of Edna St. Vincent Millay's, she says: "little man, I loved you half an hour, do not ask for more"; she who is forever intent on proclaiming the final "liberation" of woman, is also the one who says to the lover: "I shall lay myself at your feet, humble and meek"; "sweetly, I shall fall at your feet, 'neath the full moon"; "take my life; make it, if you will, your slave," in a tone which is not *feminist* surely, but *feminine* to the extreme. For many of her poems disclose a meekness and submission in the face of the "sweet torture" of love for which she ever clamors; and what she admires most in man is his virility, his physical strength. She speaks of iron muscles, of hands of steel, of a voice that makes a woman cringe, and dominates—a man's voice: warm and feared. And before this tower of strength she likes to feel small and humble.

<sup>1</sup> "Es una mujer que envidiaría quizás la suerte de Europa raptada por Jupiter". (E. Solar Correa, *Poetas de Hispano-América*, Santiago de Chile, 1926, p. 281).

<sup>2</sup> "Su musa no sabe apretarse el corsé". (L. M. Jordán, "Alfonsina Storni", in *Nosotros*, Buenos Aires, 1919, XXXII, 37-41).

This quasi-servile attitude of hers contrasts with the other she likes to assume in moments when she feels it incumbent upon her to express the muffled and stifled cry of other women who, like herself, wish to proclaim their equality with men, yet want nothing better, perhaps, than to be frail femininity in the steel grip of powerful and commanding masculine hands.

She never gives herself wholly to her passions, as do most women, for she is forever conscious of the mind—the *first nucleus*, as she calls it in *Mundo de siete pozos*—whose weight she cannot elude, and which she feels nailed fast within her by a cruel destiny. For she is aware that were it not for this propensity of hers to think, to philosophize, to rationalize, she might have found more happiness in life, more freedom. And so more than once she bemoans this cerebral chain that has the power to bind her to the stolid, cold and restricting fetters of thought, and to keep her from roaming freely in the uninhibited plains of instinct.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps because of this, many of her poems seem somewhat prosaic and *intellectual*; to reflect preconceived mental attitudes, rather than spiritual or emotional needs. Such are the ones that pretend to depict her merely as a modern, cynical, urbane, "free" woman—bereft of plebeian emotions or femininity. But there are others that are born of a true duality of spirit, with her two selves—intellectual and emotional—constantly struggling to gain the upper hand. Such are those which show antithetical reactions to one reality or thought.

Thus, she yearns to break away from "the prison of the senses," yet longs, eternally, to be stirred by passion and the honeyed pain of love. She feels at times repelled, at times attracted, by man—that "rey devorante" whose strong hands and stony build bind her relentlessly with the chains of desire. She aspires to liberate woman from the bondage and prejudices which "the sex" imposes, yet she herself, in her almost slavish attitude towards man and love, and in the typically womanly way in which she "rebels," is the best example of true femininity. She longs to abandon the restricting "cave" of life, yet hopes to live and fulfil the destiny which her heart had so zealously patterned out for her.

One can say, therefore, that Alfonsina never achieved true happiness—nor spiritual repose—not only because Fortune was adverse, but because of the insurmountable contradictions within her; for there was a bitter war, as in so many other "idealists," between her aspirations and

<sup>1</sup> "El pensamiento se enreda a mi instinto y lo ahoga, lo debilita, lo tritura" . . . (From the letter previously referred to, and published in *Revista Iberoamericana*, loc. cit.)

*Naturaleza mía . . .*

.....  
 ¿Que hice de ti? Para enfrentar tus males  
 Sobre tus formas apreté sayales,  
 Y en flagelarte puse empeño tanto  
 Que hoy filosofas ante los rosales . . . (O, 139)

reality, between her art and her life, between her emotions and her intellect.

Her poetry frequently transcends the personal bounds and becomes, at times, almost social in character. In this she differs from most women poets whose work tends to be monotonously centripetal; for whereas others look only within to find the meaning of love, of life, of death . . . she attempts to probe problems which affect others besides herself. Her poems, too, may be called "cerebral"—as she once suggested—in that she captures in them not only emotional but mental states as well. Thus, we may well consider her the most intellectual, the most objective and the most social-minded of these modernist Spanish American poetesses.

More illuminating, perhaps, than any objective critical opinion of her verse, are the statements she herself makes concerning her compositions, her books, her work in general. In interviews, in letters, in prefaces to her own books, she has given ample evidence of this propensity for auto exegesis which characterized her. Her manner at all times reveals a sincere and earnest attempt to evaluate her work in the light of possible emendation. Enrique Díez-Canedo<sup>1</sup> had already noted this constant desire for improvement, this "faculty for renovation" which are evident in her work. Commenting upon the title of her first book, *La inquietud del rosal*, he says:

. . . "al titularlo encontró instintivamente la mejor definición de sí misma. El rosal no se cansa nunca de dar rosas: en el suyo, más que la floración constante, nos sorprende el ansia de producir la rosa perfecta . . . Si Alfonsina no llevara en sí la facultad de renovación, veríamos en ella una poetisa más" . . .

Perhaps because Alfonsina had to bleed "time and serenity" from her harried life in order to write her poems, one senses that restlessness—that "inquietud"—which was mirrored in her work. More than once does she speak of this urgent need of hers for tranquillity, for hours in which meditation and repose can dictate a more serene, satisfying work:

"Esta vida mía puede dar explicación de brusquedades, contradicciones, saltos repentinos que se advierten en mis libros. Los dos (primeros libros) han sido escritos a ratos perdidos entre tareas abrumadoras, que me han impedido todavía serenarme, completar mi cultura, hacer una sosegada obra de arte".<sup>2</sup>

"Tiempo y tranquilidad me han faltado, hasta hoy, para desprenderme de mis angustias y ver así lo que está a mi alrededor. Pero si continúo escribiendo he de procurarme el tiempo y la tranquilidad que para ello me harán falta".<sup>3</sup>

In her *auto-demolition*<sup>4</sup> she gives a rapid review of the defects of

<sup>1</sup> "Alfonsina Storni, poetisa argentina", in *Repertorio Americano*, San José, Costa Rica, June 7, 1930.

<sup>2</sup> Letter written by Alfonsina to Julio Cejador, and published in his *Historia de la lengua y literatura castellana*, Madrid, 1920, vol. XIII, p. 241.

<sup>3</sup> Introduction to her fourth book: *Languidez*, published in 1920.

<sup>4</sup> *Loc. cit.*



her earlier books:

"No niego, no, que publiqué un volúmen de versos allá por el año 1916 —*La inquietud del rosal*— libro tan malo como inocente, escrito entre cartas comerciales, en tiempos en que urgencias poco poéticas me obligaban a estar nueve horas en una oficina . . . De los otros cinco libros míos, un poco mejoraditos, os haré la reseña de sus defectos: en *El dulce daño*, despreocupación de la forma, extravagancia y exceso de literatura; en *Irremediablemente*, sobre-saturación de azúcar; en *Languidez*, sobriedad excesiva; en *Ocre*, exceso de razonamiento y una antipática ironía; y en *Poemas de amor*, nada más que su brevedad. ¿Pero en cuanto a los defectos capitales, diréis, a los defectos con mayúscula? Allá van: poca severidad en la selección, complejidad, precipitación, desorden, despreocupación de detalles" . . .

Still, in spite of the many defects ascribed to her work, which she is the first to recognize and admit—"llena de horribles lunares: defectuosa, desencontrada"—she cannot deny, she says, the current opinion that she is a great poetess: "no puedo negar la opinión corriente . . . soy una gran poetisa".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Autodemolición", *loc. cit.*



### III

## JUANA DE IBARBOUROU

### 1. LIFE AND WORKS

The last of the great poetesses of this period is Juana de Ibarbourou of Uruguay, who was known simply as Juanita Fernández until her marriage to the army officer with the Basque name which, according to Unamuno, means "head of the valley."<sup>1</sup> She was born in 1895, in Melo:

. . . Ciudad de coloniales casas  
En medio de la pánica llanura  
Y cerca del Brasil . . .<sup>2</sup>

She passed her childhood, and the ardent years of dream-filled adolescence, in those rustic—almost wild—surroundings. They in turn communicated to her all their fragrance and élan, and planted deep that "savage root" that long, weary years of civilized life have not been able to eradicate.

Her culture, never profound, has undoubtedly been nurtured in the last few years when her position in the world of letters has permitted—and, perhaps, required—her to enlarge her literary vision. Her first books revealed a freshness, a spontaneity, a charming lack of profundity<sup>3</sup> which only a mind untaught can produce. Her superficiality of thought has always made the sensorial appeal which her verses evoke stronger.

She has inspired many paeans of praise, in prose and verse.<sup>4</sup> And her name, exalted to fetichistic heights by warm admirers, reached the pinnacle of glory when on the tenth of August, 1929, in the Palacio Legislativo of Montevideo, it was consecrated in the annals of literature as *Juana de América*. No greater honor has ever been bestowed on any other poet of the Continent!

Juana de Ibarbourou has published three books of verse, and three of prose—equally poetic. Numerous selections of her works have appeared; for her popularity, even over a long period of non-publication, has never waned.

Vicente A. Salaverri, who is credited with having occasioned her

<sup>1</sup> From a letter written to J. de I. after having read *Las lenguas de diamante*, her first book. It is dated: Salamanca, 18-9-19.

<sup>2</sup> Emilio Oribe: "El grito" from *El castillo interior*, Montevideo, 1917.

<sup>3</sup> Vargas Vila, the Colombian novelist, recalling his recent visit to Montevideo, said of her: "Es sumamente ignorante, pero quizás allá resida el encanto de sus versos" (R. Maya, "Entrevista con Vargas Vila", in *Nosotros*, Buenos Aires, 1924, XLVII, p. 225). Very different was the impression she was to create some years later on another writer from Colombia, for Nieto Caballero says of her: "Estudia. Se ocupa en labores tan serias como la de investigar la razón de la influencia de grandes estadistas. Su comprensión es muy vasta" . . . (*Repertorio Americano*, San José, Costa Rica, Nov. 17, 1928).

<sup>4</sup> Notable among the poems are those written by Luisa Luisi, Alfonsina Storni, Emilio Frugoni and Fernán Silva Valdés.



literary début by publishing seven sonnets of hers in the pages of *La Razón*, tells of her arrival at the editorial office of the then-popular Montevidean review with two notebooks of verses which she timidly handed over for him to read. He opened them with distrust, he admits, but closed them with enthusiasm and admiration; for the poems—some of them lamentably incorrect in form—evinced “an extraordinary temperament.” “She was an Hebraic poetess,” he writes, “of a contagious pantheism and a fragrant sensuality.”<sup>1</sup>

Her poems were read with interest; and shortly after (1919) *Las lenguas de diamante*, her first book, was published, bearing a gracious prologue by the Argentine writer Manuel Gálvez. *El cántaro fresco*—in prose—appeared a year later (1920), and was followed by *Raíz salvaje* (1922), which definitely enshrined the poetess in the high literary niche she occupies to this day.

During the eight years that intervened between *Raíz salvaje* and her most recent book of poems published more than a decade ago: *La rosa de los vientos* (1930), several selections of her works appeared—in Barcelona, in Madrid, in Chile; and numerous translations in English, in French, in Italian . . . the most extensive being Miomandre's notable rendering of most of the poems of her third book under the title of *La touffe sauvage*. She has written for outstanding magazines and newspapers, contributing not only poems but also children's tales and lullabies. In recent years her interest in pedagogy has prompted her to compile two textbooks: *Ejemplario* and *Páginas de literatura contemporánea*.

Always deeply devout—in spite of the pantheistic and pagan qualities of her work—she has of late sought inspiration in religion and the Bible, publishing three notable works—two books in prose: *Loores de Nuestra Señora* (1934) and *Estampas de la Biblia* (1934), and a poem: *San Francisco de Asís* (1935).

But the modality of Juana de Ibarbourou which is best known, and which won her an undisputed place in Spanish American letters, is that of her first books—the most typical, the most *Ibarbourian*. In them she sings only of the elemental things, and, therefore, the eternal ones: of love, of life, of death—but above all, and enveloping everything in a vibrant, translucent veil, of *nature*.

Her first book—*Las lenguas de diamante*—sings of love unbounded, and of youth; and although some poems, especially those she includes in the section “Anforas negras”, speak of pain and bitterness and even of death, they are, as Unamuno said, “more imagined than felt.” The elegiac note in this, her book of joy, of springtime and of youth, made him feel as if she, possessing a lyre of exceptional quality and tonal range,

<sup>1</sup> In *Nosotros*, Buenos Aires, 1919, XXXI.

had wanted to pluck all its chords—even though some might have been borrowed. Leave sadness until it comes, he cautioned.

Although preeminently one of love, this book reveals all the facets of personality and moods, and all the themes that are to reappear in later books. Basically, then, this book *is* Juana de Ibarbourou. For there is little in *Raíz salvaje* or even in *La rosa de los vientos* that is not already here, except that certain concepts change, certain ardent thoughts are tempered, certain illusions, as well as certain fears, are dispelled—as they are in life. But what she gains in depth, in “philosophic” concept, in form and expression, she loses in ardor, in freshness, and in spontaneity. She is now a better versifier, a more polished stylist, a follower of “the new trends” in poetry, with a superabundance of symbolism, of imagery. But there is nothing *distinctive* about all this. And were it not that the old Juana—she who threatened to be “a scandal” as the unwilling passenger in Charon’s grim ferry (“Caronte: yo seré un escándalo en tu barca”)—is still present, never quite hidden behind the thick wall of modernity, these new verses of hers would be merely another of the many examples of good poetry which is now being produced in all Spanish America, but, as we said, not distinctive as those first books of hers were.

Received somewhat as Delmira Agustini’s books had been a decade earlier—although with less sensationalism—some praised the “chaste daring” of her verses; some censured their excessive and uncalled-for frankness. Yet all recognized a new note in feminine poetry: a rustic note that was to be widely imitated by countless women who thought it prudent to clothe their erotic verses, oftentimes uninspired, in the revealing yet chaste garments of nature.

Love—in all its forms—is here: passionate, healthy, ardent, happy love; sometimes a little sad, yet not quite tragic. Never before had anyone in the ardent tropics—and a woman at that—sung so unperturbedly of the “chaste impudicity” of love. Never before had a woman offered herself in a manner that was really a command to take her—take her *now* and not tomorrow. Yet never was the surrender so beautifully, so unaffectedly expressed. And she offered herself, not as Delmira did—with the somber grimace of one who sounds the pith of love, and feels its poignancy—but with a naturalness that belied the urgency of her plea: “Descíñeme, amante; descíñeme, amante”. For here was a woman ruled not by morals, or conventions, which she dared to overlook—nor even by those yielding, but sheltering barriers that the “timidity” of the sex imposes—but by a primitive urge to be taken simply as one plucks a fruit, picks a flower, or drinks in the refreshing water of a stream:

*Crecí  
Para tí.  
Tálame . . .*

*Flori*  
*Para ti.*  
*Córtame . . .*

*Fluí*  
*Para ti.*  
*Bébeme . . . (L,<sup>1</sup> 29)*

This primitive love, this constant ardor which youth inspires, and which she records in pages that breathe the purifying air of nature—and exude its fragrance—is what made her unique, and, in her manner, unsurpassed in Spanish American letters.

The mood this first book of hers translates is characterized by an exuberance, a superabundance of life, which is marked by a constant need of light, of movement, and a consequent dread of darkness and immobility—synthesized in death. And she who is young only feels happy in the presence of the freshness, the fragrance, the verdancy of nature; and dejected in the other aridity which suggests lifelessness, decomposition and death. She, therefore, feels an ardent cult for water, which in the form of rivers, or of rain, keeps things alive and verdant.

Characteristic of the "primitive" manner she popularized—and unsurpassed in later books—are poems like "Salvaje", "Fugitiva", "Panteísmo"; poems that have been imitated countless times yet never rivaled by poetesses who erroneously attempt to reproduce, without her talent, their most salient features.

The poems of *Las lenguas de diamante*, although written down much later, probably took form when Juana de Ibarbourou was still living that wild, joyous life of which she sings. *El cántaro fresco*, published but one year later, shows her as a woman far more mature who only comes upon the life that was in the nostalgic paths of remembrance. The change is abrupt: from adolescence to womanhood; from carefree childhood to motherhood. And the fact that these pages are written in prose seems to indicate a sobering effect upon her intoxicating moods of love, of life and of narcissism.

She suddenly becomes serious, proper and domestic. And the disturbing thoughts of love, and those of daring and sweet surrender, are no longer here. For she is now the mother of a son, the manager of a home, and the rustic paradise is no more. But in her heart she lives the life that was—going back to the "happier days" with undue facility (*Selva*, *La mariposa*, *Los grillos*, *El trigo*, *Los parrales*, *El haz de hierba*, *Las chicharras*). Her thoughts are more solemn now, and less

<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations will be used when quoting from the books of Juana de Ibarbourou: L: (*Las*) *Lenguas de diamante*, Buenos Aires, 1926; CF: *El cántaro fresco*, Montevideo, 1920; R: *Raíz salvaje*, Montevideo, 1924; RV: *La rosa de los vientos*, Montevideo, 1930.



self-centered. But the same fears persist: the dread of immobility, of darkness, and of death. The fear of growing old is now more acute than in her youthful plea to the lover to take her now, and not tomorrow, "ere youth and freshness fade." And she feels the same joys in sunshine, in color, and in movement; the same avidity for life; the same irrepressible attachment for nature, grown, if anything, more tender. The simple joys are glorified; the simple pleasures exalted. And a certain sweet melancholy pervades.

In *Raíz salvaje*, which has been rightfully called a commentary in verse of *El cántaro fresco*, she again is "la hembra primitiva"—although seldom with the lightness of heart that characterized the first love songs. And, strangely enough, in poetic garb she again resorts to her characteristic frankness in matters erotic. Yet many of these poems, like the compositions in prose of *El cántaro fresco*, are written from the point of view of one who, chained to a life of what must seem "repression and immobility," recalls with hungry avidity the vibrant joys of the past.

These are more tranquil verses as a whole—more polished in form, more terse in concept. They evince a successful effort to eliminate most non-essentials. And there is a greater variety of verse structure; for she succeeded in freeing herself from the bondage of the sonnet, which in her case never attained the limpidity and perfection sometimes arrived at by more expert stylists, and which proved somewhat tyrannical and monotonous in her first book of poems.

This book is ruled by the thought expressed in the title, *Raíz salvaje*, and by the rebellious mood of the mono-stanzaic, untitled poem with which it opens:

*¡Si estoy harta de esta vida civilizada!  
 ¡Si tengo ansias sin nombre de ser libre y feliz!  
 ¡Si aunque florezca en rosas nadie podrá cambiarme  
 La salvaje raíz!*

For she is deeply aware of the inextricable savage root that lies within her; a root which a civilized covering may hide from other eyes—but never from her own consciousness. She never feels a part of the present "sheltered" life; for her roots, planted in the lusty soil of the wild and open country, bind her irrevocably to its "nourishing breast." That is why she always finds moral sustenance and strength in nature—and spiritual regeneration. And she looks to its wise teachings for her own spiritual guidance:

*Río elástico y largo:  
 Enséñale a mi alma  
 A formarse un remanso (R, 50)*

*Vieja selva que miras cómo nos marchitamos  
Sin encontrar la clave para reverdecer:  
Dime si siendo humildes, dime si siendo puros  
Lograremos tu fuerte y gallarda vejez* (R, 52)

As in *El cántaro fresco*, the past is repeatedly evoked—nowhere more touchingly than in "El vendedor de naranjas", where the sight of an Indian boy selling oranges, and the sweet, fragrant spheres in his basket, bring back memories that make the meaning of the word "nostalgia" trenchantly clear:

*Si a otro pago muy lejos del tuyo  
Indiecito, algún día te llevan,  
Y no eres feliz, y suspiras  
Por volver a tu vieja querencia,  
  
Y una tarde en un soplo de viento  
El sabor a tus montes te asalta,  
Ya sabrás, indiecito asombrado,  
Lo que es la palabra "nostalgia"! (R, 100)*

Yet there is no mention of the past in poems like "Como la primavera",<sup>1</sup> "La sed",<sup>2</sup> "La tarde",<sup>3</sup> which breathe an air of actuality that proves her verily to be, as she claimed, "la misma muchacha salvaje".

Her fondness for nature, if anything, is intensified; the water,<sup>4</sup> the trees,<sup>5</sup> always so much a part of her, become still closer. And there is now in her verse a pictoric quality, a terse colorfulness, that was lacking in her first book of poems.

Love is now more serene, probably because she has matured. The restlessness which haunted her in her uncontrollable ardor ("esta inquietud constante" . . .) has evolved into a more placid regard for the lover. But the feeling is deeper. The love scenes are more tranquil, too, for all words have been spoken. He knows now what she is for him ("Lo

1 *Como un ala negra tendí mis cabellos  
Sobre tus rodillas.  
Cerrando los ojos su olor aspiraste  
Diciéndome luego:  
—¿Duermes sobre piedras cubiertas de musgos?  
Con ramas de sauces te atas las trenzas?  
Tu almohada es de trébol?* (R, 11)

2 *Tu beso fué en mis labios  
De un dulzor refrescante.  
Sensación de agua viva y moras negras  
Me dió tu boca, amante.  
Cansada me acosté sobre los pastos  
Con tu brazo tendido, por apoyo* (R, 43)

3 *He bebido del chorro cándido de la fuente.  
Traigo los labios frescos y la cara mojada . . .* (R, 57)

4 "Noche de lluvia", "Melancolía", "La laguna", "El baño", "La sed", "El remanso", "El pozo", "El estanque", "La copa", "El agua corriente", "Millonarios".

5 "Los pinos", "Los árboles en la llanura", "El bosque", "Camino de álamos", "La higuera", "El nido".

que soy para ti", L, 15). And so there is no need for her to repeat those ardent phrases of surrender. The general agitation and the fervor that attend love in its first stages are absent from "Como la primavera" y "La sed", for instance, where tenderness and a deep understanding unite to make the bond still stronger.

There is a gentle air of melancholy—more genuine now, and more restrained; for life has taught her many things. There is nothing in *Las lenguas de diamante*, with all its talk of suffering and pain, comparable to the depth and authenticity of:

*Yo estoy triste y sola tirada en la sombra* (R, 40)

*Abórrame, mi Dios, la cruel angustia  
De sentarme hoy también, sola, a la mesa* (R, 88)

—*¡Quién pudiera ser niño y sentarse en la calle  
Sin angustias ni trabas, a jugar con el lodo!* (R, 15)

Calm, sleep—and even death!—are held blessed; for they have the power to dull anguish, to relax strained, tired nerves and "to refresh":

*Y es tan serena la noche  
Y es tan intensa la calma,  
Que se adormece mi angustia  
Y se evaporan las lágrimas* (R, 42)

*... ¡delicia del sueño que afloja  
La loca y eterna tensión de mis nervios!* (R, 73)

*He visto la muerte de cerca, de cerca,  
Era tal como una mariposa negra.*

.....  
*¡Y yo necesito sentir la frescura  
Que dan sus dos alas de gamuza negra!* (R, 37)

This growing feeling for the need of "un minuto de desprendimiento" becomes characteristic in her most recent phase of poetic evolution.

From the pages of *La rosa de los vientos* a far more conscious artist greets us; one who has felt the need—or was it the advisability?—to discard the old familiar garb and don the new; to be "à la page", as some one said. Reading this book one often has the impression that the poetess wished to astound by her modernity; that she wanted all to know that she could achieve the latest stylistic pirouettes with as much dexterity, fluency and ease as any one. The result is almost a labyrinth of images, picturesque and ingenious for the most part, through which one has to wind to arrive at the actually limp—often surprisingly elementary—thought expressed. For any obscurity in these last poems of hers is only in form, never in essence.

These poems differ from the earlier ones mainly in her apparent change of attitude in respect to life. But rather than a change we con-



sider it an evolution. Basically she is the same, although, naturally, somewhat "toned down" and "awakened" by maturity. Yet we have seen that already in *El cántaro fresco* there had been a considerable change; that the restless "muchacha salvaje" of *Las lenguas de diamante* had been superseded by a quiet, serious, taciturn woman; and that all the joy those pages held was that which translated the moods and evoked the scenes of the past.

The changes apparent then were mainly those of perspective. For while her first book related events of the past in the light of the past, *El cántaro fresco* and *Raíz salvaje* speak of the present, and of the past, but viewed—especially in the former book—in the light of the present. Her more recent book of poems deals wholly with the present—a far from joyful one, we gather, and too distant now from the happy past to find solace in its remembrance. But that "raíz salvaje" is still there, still deeply rooted within. And in her images (invariably inspired by nature), in old thoughts that are sometimes visible behind their modern garb, in characteristic gestures and moods, one discerns but little fundamental change.

If she sang before because life was good, and love and youth lighted her spirit, she now finds need to express those other things life holds: bitterness, hopelessness, pain—those haunting things which shut out laughter and light from her soul. If there was any doubt before as to her sincerity in respect to these bleaker moods, there is none now; for the time that Unamuno presaged<sup>1</sup> came, and she who once, perhaps, only imagined she knew sorrow and pain—and almost revelled in it—now truly appears to know of days "bitter like a newly-formed fruit."

Her joy is no longer the spontaneous, irrepressible spark of yore, but a conscious torch she carries in an effort to keep herself from falling into the fathomless depths of despair. Her repeated allusions to happiness,<sup>2</sup> to hope;<sup>3</sup> her constant desire to be jubilant and gay,<sup>4</sup> strike a pathetic

<sup>1</sup> "... debe usted dejar las tristezas hasta que ellas vengan—que, desgraciadamente, teniendo como usted tiene un alma sensible y hasta ardiente, le vendrán . . ."

<sup>2</sup>       *En la piragua roja del mediodía*  
           *He arribado a las islas de la Alegría sin causa* (21)  
           *Iremos por mares nunca navegados*  
           *A pescar los rojos pececitos de la alegría* (35)  
           *(Pudo tenerme cuando yo era un gajo de alegría*  
           *Curvado hacia su hombro grave)* (41)  
           *Llevo este don de felicidad*  
           *Como una lámpara encendida resguardada en las manos* (49)

<sup>3</sup>       *Mi alma sesga sobre los cauces sombríos*  
           *La garúa luminosa de la esperanza* (18)  
           *El navío de la esperanza*  
           *Ha olvidado los caminos claros de mi puerto* (53)

*Toda la tarde alisé un madero de esperanza*  
           *Para que fuera la proa*  
           *De un avión o una nave de triunfo* (60)  
<sup>4</sup>       *"Canción del deseo de júbilo"* (35)

and frustrated note. And there is bravery in her wish to dance upon her bleeding heart (. . . "yo bailaré sobre mi corazón herido"); strength and purpose in her desire to go and conquer destiny ("Ir a conquistar el destino"); and a will to preserve whatever happiness is meted out to her, which is almost a challenge:

*Pero mi alegría queda intacta y la veré multiplicada  
En los caireles fulgurantes del sueño.*

.....  
*. . . la llevo como un clavel del aire*

.....  
*Ahora es mía y la levanto en alto,*

.....  
*Alegría de un día que yo he de salvar  
Del maleficio de las horas brujas (33-34).*

Before, she could find balm in nature and in memories of an idyllic past; but now she has to resort to more toxic, and less curative measures. For she finds her "artificial paradise" in dreams—dreams of realized hopes, of painless days, and the tantalizing ones of travel.

She did not always have this vice of dreaming that made an endless night—brilliant and jubilant with stars—of Delmira Agustini's life. Yet at times she feels that she must seek a dream to compensate her for the vacuity and drabness of a day—the craziest dream she can find; one that might have a puppet player's cap, or a tattooed, fantastic face:

*Yo quiero un sueño que me compense de este día  
Claro, vacío, monótono . . .*

.....  
*Elegiría el sueño más loco  
El que tuviese un gorro de titiritero  
O la cara tatuada y fantástica (p. 80).*

This desire to dream—which she attributes to having, as a child, drunk of the waters of the Tacuari river, and which formerly had taken the form of youthful reverie—becomes more of a necessity as the realities of life become sharper. And her soul clamors for the minute of release, of detachment, when the spirit sets out alone on the soft road of dreams:

*Toda mi alma clama por el minuto de desprendimiento  
Cuando el espíritu se echa a andar solo  
Por los caminos blandos del sueño . . . (10)*

—a road that leads to the "país de los caminos iluminados/ por el mirasol giratorio de los sueños", where the world, and even life, cease to exist.

She who once felt that "savage love" for light; who had such dread

---

*Hervor del deseo de cantar alegre (37)*

*Avidez de tomar parte alborozada en la fiesta  
De las cintas de colores y las cuentas fulgurantes (38)*

of darkness and the night that brought it on, now becomes ill from the violent perfume which the tunic of light brings. And she feels the need of night which shuts her eyes, fatigued by the sight of faces; the night that dulls the sharpness of words and brings to the ears an echo of throats without hate. She is wearied by the "heroic pain" of nightly fashioning for herself a pair of wings; for the day, indefatigable grinder of shears, steel daggers and iron swords, rudely cuts them off and leaves her again bereft of her only means of escape.

Still, in spite of the fascination night now holds for her, she knows that it is "arbitrary and toxic," and that "only the day can save us"; for "from the small death of every night things are born pure," and, with the dawn, everything acquires an air of birth. If she once needed night "to duplicate hope," she now wants to turn her back to it and to the afternoon, its harbinger, and nevermore to dream. Yet she has faith and hope in the future. For the Potter Who fashions the clay jars of the coming days makes each one different and unique. And if yesterday's had borders of harsh stone and the opaque concavity of an empty cistern, others will come nestled in honeycombs, or in the softness of a live petal. She now awaits one, clear and pure, which will have the golden hue of untouched honey (RV, 44).

But stronger than her bent for dreaming, far more persistent, and having the same heritage: the Tacuari river,<sup>1</sup> is her desire to travel. She who knows that every dawn will bring only "a sterile peace of inert hands upon the knees," is beset by an immense longing to go and lay her head upon the knees of the Unknown.<sup>2</sup> For in her drab horizon she has discovered a new hue: "the color of the desire to go through unknown places to far-off cities."

Only in imagination and in dreams can she satisfy this "ansiedad constante", this "afán de partida"<sup>3</sup> that fill her. It is not surprising, therefore, that so many of these later poems should be inspired by themes and motives of the sea. In these imaginary voyages on the nocturnal oceans of dreams, through the unnavigated seas of the abstract, she goes in search of "the little red fish of happiness." And knowing that the shores of day are still far-distant, she laughs as she flings her cast-off sadness into the port of Rejoicing.

Except for some poems which appear from time to time—similar in mood and form to those of *La rosa de los vientos*—one can say that Juana de Ibarbourou has entered upon a new literary phase. With the publica-

<sup>1</sup> *Los que han probado sus aguas  
Se han hecho soñadores y vagabundos* (106)

<sup>2</sup> Ir,  
Y apoyar la cabeza en las rodillas de lo desconocido (48)

<sup>3</sup> The following poems best reflect this "longing for departure": "Día de felicidad sin causa", "Timonel de mi sueño", "Hora de espera", "Canción del deseo de júbilo", "Ir a conquistar el destino", "Días sin fe", "El grito", "Las olas", "El Atlántico".



tion in 1934 of *Loores de Nuestra Señora* and *Estampas de la Biblia*, and of the poem *San Francisco de Asís*, a year later, she lays aside her former manner of auto-description and self-revelation to sing, in limpid prose, the praises of the Virgin; to depict, in chiselled portraits, the dramatic figures of the Old Testament; and to relate, with lyric fervor, the vibrant episode of Saint Francis and the Leper.

The *Loores* are poetic commentaries—or amplifications—of the various “praises” of the Litany: *Mater amabilis, Rosa sine spina, Turris eburnea, Porta coeli, Stella matutina* . . . These are pages filled with all the beauty, the love, the tenderness, the veneration and the fervor which the Virgin—*Consolatrix afflictorum*—inspires in her. And she offers them as she would a floral tribute—simple and pure and fragrant—to the “sweet and divine protector” who has guided her through the night of “confusion” to the clear day of faith; to serenity, fortitude, beatitude and hope. From the diaphanous depths of her spirit flow these fervent “loores”: *Mater boni consilii, Turris davidica, Domus aurea, Spes ultima*.

The *Estampas* are succinct but inspired “self-portraits” of some of the outstanding and moving Biblical figures: Adam, Cain, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Solomon, Daniel, Sarah, Rebecca, Ruth, Judith, Esther. Each identifies himself clearly and simply, sketching in words and images of distinct Biblical flavor, a highly dramatic, warm portrait; for rather than static pictures these are live, vibrantly human descriptions that reveal the inner workings of mind and soul of these men and women—some austere, some gentle, some pathetic—who have served as inspiration to countless comments in prose and verse. By no means inferior in poetic concept and interpretative value, these *Estampas de la Biblia* add some creditable pages to the ever-growing literature that finds an inexhaustible source of material in “the book that has no peer.”

In these books her expression is always clear and direct, with an elegant simplicity that bears slight comparison with the somewhat rococo leanings of *La rosa de los vientos*, and that seems closer to the fragrant, nostalgic pages of *El cántaro fresco*. And as she herself was seeking spiritual anchorage in the tempestuous seas of uncertainty, so did her pen essay distinct modes of expression until, like her spirit, it found a limpid, tranquil lake to reflect its steady and clear image. Whatever road she takes in the future, she will always carry with her the sacred dust of these paths she followed to arrive at “la montaña de la serenidad definitiva”.

## 2. THEMES

As one reads the poetry of Juana de Ibarbourou one sees how everything that concerns her most: love, life, death, herself . . . is seen and interpreted as part of nature; for nature is the mirror that reflects her thoughts, her emotions, her moods, her manner of expression. It is

difficult, therefore, to isolate her themes and attempt to define them singly; for not only are they all interrelated as regards nature, but there is a deep inner unity of thought and concept—not necessarily premeditated—that makes each an indispensable part of the other. The thought of love, for instance, immediately evokes the desire for life, the fear of death, the pleasure she finds in offering to the lover her sun-browned, elastic, fragrant body; the thought of life summons up appetizing feasts of love, as she proffers her tempting beauty with a joy marred only by the haunting thought that youth, alas!, is not everlasting, and that death will one day extinguish the starry gaze in her eyes, will pale the bloom of her cheek, will reduce arms that embrace and lips that burn to lifeless ashes; the thought of death steals short-lived joy from what might otherwise have been cloudless hours of love, it awakens the desire for endless life as part of nature, for ever-verdant beauty; the thought of herself, fragrant with nards, and proud of her youth, her beauty, her desirability, calls up visions of the lover waiting to pluck the flowers and the fruits of love, while life still lends them fragrance and flavor—before death wilts and robs them of their power to lure . . .

Set against a background of nature, each one of these themes is presented simply—one might almost say *naively*—without great depth of thought, without philosophical implications, but with a freshness and spontaneity which only poetry of this type can possess. For her ideas upon life, upon death, upon love, are not transcendental, but the direct, basic ones of a person who does not seek to comprehend what there is, or may be, beyond that which meets the eye. She bases her ideas of love upon her feelings and desires; those of life upon what she sees of nature; those of death upon what she knows of life. She does not attempt to pry or indagate into the unknown—or to deduce the why and the wherefore of things; for she is as simple and elemental and direct in her thoughts and in her emotions, as the flowers, the fruits, the trees and the other creatures of nature that fill her verses and with which more than once she identifies and compares herself.

Her love of nature, in every form, is intense—all-embracing. She feels a sort of kinship with it; for, as she says, she is convinced that in a past life she herself had roots and sprang flowers, and felt, hanging from her branches, terse fruits, heavy with sweet juice:

Estoy convencida de que en una vida ancestral, hace ya miles de años, yo tuve raíces y gajos, dí flores, sentí pendientes de mis ramas, que eran como brazos jugosos y verdes, frutas tersas, pesadas de zumo dulce . . . (CF, 21).

Perhaps that is why her body still retains that "odor of springtime," and her mouth is fresh and fragrant like a newly-cut rose . . .

She loves the forests, the fields, the meadows, the long green roads

("las selvas, los campos, los prados, los largos caminos verdes" . . .), but in her heart she harbors a true predilection for water:

*¡Cuánto me gusta el agua!  
¡Cuánto me gusta el agua!  
Hacia ella se inclina  
Como un junco mi alma (R, 18)*

She feels for it a sisterly affection ("yo siento por el agua un cariño de hermana"); and so she wonders if in another "ancestral life" she may not have been a cistern, a fountain or a river:

*Acaso, en otra vida  
Ancestral, yo habré sido  
Antes de ser de carne,  
Cisterna, fuente o río . . . (R, 18)*

She loves the water not only for the physical joy she finds in its refreshing sweetness, but also because to her it typifies goodness, tenderness, sincerity, purity, charity . . . and "tastes of truth." And so she calls it "la buena criatura," or "Sor caridad". For when one is tormented by a burning thirst, this "kindly creature" offers her breast that one may drink; when one is suffering from a gaping wound, her clear current forms a refreshing and soothing bandage; when one feels tired, or feverish, or depressed, there is nothing that comforts more. And so when she feels as if a hidden hand were hurling pebbles of sorrow at her soul, she goes to the well and instantly finds her panacea. The mere touch of the humid clay pitcher against her cheek, or a little rain water in the hollow of her hand, brings comfort and fills the moment with gladness.

Besides being a physical and spiritual balm, water—rain—brings about that fragrant freshness which the earth exudes; it decks the fields in verdant softness; it weighs down the tree branches with sweet loads of turgid fruit; it adorns and scents the world with its crown of sweet-smelling flowers. Life, verdure, color, aromas—what Juana de Ibarbourou loves most—are the result of the vivifying power contained in those drops whose sound charms her ears and whose touch sets her body tingling.

But she is also familiar with the reverse side of the picture; for under the implacable rays of the sun, in the aridness of the dry season, she has walked the long ocher roads which traverse parched fields—devoid of plants or verdure. And she sees the elm trees as sentinels—looking over the "yellow anxiety" of the fields; awaiting "the dreamed-of message of rain," as they watch the clouds and question the winds, that they may announce its approach, jubilantly, to the alert ears of the suffering roots. And she pictures, too, the millions of little green mouths open to receive its generous life-giving stream after a long drought, while the birds huddle close under the protecting umbrellas of the leaves.

That is why water holds so sacred a meaning for her; water in all



forms—whether it be the far-off, powerful water of the sea, or the rain, or the more familiar one of rivers, lakes, ponds, wells or faucets; whether turbulent, running or still—water, which to her is a live creature that “talks, dreams, sings, kisses and comforts.”

A mere listing of all the plants she mentions, of all the trees, the flowers, the fruits, the animals and insects that appear in her poems, would only serve to confirm, once more, that there is nothing in nature that escapes the notice, or fails to arouse the interest, of this poetess who always sees herself—in life as well as in death—as an integral part of it.

Her thoughts and sympathies are with the water, the trees, the plants and all the other components of nature with which she feels such a deep and significant kinship. She can understand their gestures—for her so meaningful—and interpret their mute language:

*Es un montón de álamos rumorosos y agudos  
Aferrados en medio de la árida llanura,  
Las raíces pequeñas de los pastos resecos  
Les claman el mensaje soñado de la lluvia.*

*Y ellos miran las nubes, e interrogan al viento,  
Y hacen ¡no!, con la verde cabeza de sus copas,  
—¡Aún el agua demora!—suspiran las gramíneas  
Que bajo el sol se enroscan (R, 47)*

*Yo entiendo lo que dicen las gotas cantarinas.  
La lluvia, en mi ventana, tiene voces divinas (L, 123)*

She can sense the supreme sanctity of the water which administers kindness like a Sister of Charity; the friendly benignity of the sun that warms the fragrant earth on which she loves to lie; the staunch nobility of the elms that “like a row of good boys” hold steadfast watch over all; the never-ending sadness of the cypress that has become a citizen of all the cemeteries of the earth; the bitter suffering of the fig tree that writhes in the pain of its ugliness. And she walks among them all like a friend, finding solace and freshness, food, fragrance and rest in the water, the fruits, the plants and flowers, the trees, and in the sun-warmed carpet of the earth.

Often she is alone with nature (“He huroneado en la selva milenaria de cedros . . . y he corrido por todos los pedrosos caminos” . . . L, 91; “Siento un acre placer en tenderme en la tierra”, L, 149; “He bebido del chorro cándido de la fuente . . . Elástica de gozo cual un gamo he corrido /por todos los ceñudos senderos de la tierra,” R, 57). But she finds the greatest joy in sharing these things she delights in with the lover:

*Bajo la luna llena, que es una oblea de cobre,  
Vagamos taciturnos en un éxtasis vago . . . (L, 7)*

*Me vestiré de blanco, me aromaré de rosas,  
E iremos por las rutas que huelen a tomillo . . .* (L, 119)

*Iremos por los campos de la mano,  
A través de los bosques y los trigos . . .* (L, 139)

*¡Qué alocado retorno hacia la aldea,  
Ceñidos por los bilos de la lluvia . . .* (L, 152)

*Tómame de la mano. Vámonos a la lluvia  
Descalzos y lijeros de ropa, sin paraguas . . .* (R, 97)

Like Adam and Eve they seem to be alone in the world ("Somos grandes y solos sobre el haz de los campos"); and any other people they encounter—shepherds, laborers—are always unidentified and have far less individuality than the trees, the flowers, the wind, the water, and even the odors that greet her at every step.

All the flora of her region find entrance in her poetry—not in a disinterested or detached manner, nor as casual "color," but as a complement to herself, as an emotional expansion, as a friend, as an accomplice. For the many plants that scent the roads, like the trees, like the flowers, are silent but sympathetic witnesses of her joys and sorrows, mute spectators at her trysts, artful adjuncts to her charms.

She does not tire of speaking of the "dulce *laurel* hospitalario", the *hiedra*, the fragrant *tomillo*, the *gramíneas*, *camalotes* . . . nor of the trees: the "*pinos olorosos y negros*", the "*ceibos frondosos*", the "*álamos rumorosos y agudos*"; of "*la higuera . . . aspera y fea*", the "*ciruelos redondos*", "*limoneros rectos*", "*naranjos de brotes lustrosos*", and all those others under whose rustling branches she so often found comfort and rest—and love.

Many flowers—alive with color, and of penetrating aroma—appear in the course of her poems: poppies, pansies, daisies, sunflowers, azaleas, jasmines. But those she mentions most frequently, and which lend her beauty (when pinned to her breast, or in her dark hair) and that tantalizing fragrance which so charms the lover, are roses, lilies, violets, dahlias and nards.

Flowers give an indefinable, alluring fragrance to her body as a whole—and to her hair—but fruits make her lips luscious and tempting. And as she goes in avid search of blackberries or strawberries, which make her lips fragrant and vivid, she knows that eating them is a prelude to the kiss:

*¡Canastito repleto de fresas!  
.....  
Y después que las hemos comido,  
Lentamente besarme en los labios  
Que ellas ponen fragantes y vivos* (R, 79)

—the kiss that other lips, "dulces como de fresa", and that give her

a "sensación de agua viva y *moras* negras", will let fall upon her own like a ripe fruit.

She sinks her healthy teeth into "el fruto dulce y sano/ de las rústicas vides y los higos/que coronan las tunas"; into "the compact meat" of juice-filled peaches, plums, pears, grapes, apples, oranges and all the other fruits she gathers in her rich orchard. But she relishes the rustic blackberries and strawberries the most; and quinces, because of their pungent odor. She uses the "membrillos redondos y pintones" to perfume her closets, and her clothes absorb that "olor frutal" which gives her body its "constant flavor of spring."

As prolific as the plant life, as varied and as typical, are the small animals and birds, and especially the insects whose movements so intrigue this "intuitive and rustic entomologist." Butterflies, glowworms, moths, ants, beetles, crickets; lizards, moles, frogs, toads, sparrows, magpies, parrots . . . all appear as part of that exuberant and animated landscape which serves as background to her own tempestuous moods.

Passionately fond of the sun, the warmth, the bustle and the joy of life upon earth ("el sol, el calor, el ruido y la alegría de la vida sobre la tierra") she cannot think of ever forgoing them. Yet knowing that She who puts out the lamps of life ("la apagadora de las lámparas") cares nothing for her "solicitous anxiety of life, of clarity, of sky" . . . she implores the lover that if she die, he bury her not deep, but near the earth's surface where she can still be lulled by the wild chirping of the birds or the joyous chatter of the fountain; where the sun can warm her bones, and her eyes, stretched into growing shoots, can come up to behold once more "the savage lamp of the red sunsets." For she foresees the struggle of her flesh to come up again—the need to feel, in its particles, the freshness of the wind. Therefore she asks that he strew seeds on her grave so that they may take root in her "diminished bones." On the ladder of the live shoots she will come up to see him through the purple lilies!

Death, then, may effect changes in her flesh, but her desire to feel the warmth of the sun, or the fresh caress of the breeze; to hear the "divine" chatter of the birds and of the fountains, and to see the lover, will never be dulled. This belief in the continuance of one's likes and desires after death—of the same joys she experiences in life—and in the perpetuation of one's being in some form or another, is nowhere better expressed than in her oft-quoted "Vida garfio":

*Amante: no me lleves, si muero, al camposanto.  
A flor de tierra abre mi fosa, junto al riente  
Alboroto divino de alguna pajarera,  
O junto a la encantada charla de alguna fuente.*



*A flor de tierra, amante. Casi sobre la tierra  
Donde el sol me caliente los huesos, y mis ojos  
Alargados en tallos, suban a ver de nuevo  
La lámpara salvaje de los ocasos rojos.*

*A flor de tierra, amante. Que el tránsito así sea  
Más breve. Yo presiento  
La lucha de mi carne por volver hacia arriba,  
Por sentir en sus átomos la frescura del viento.*

*Yo sé que acaso nunca allá abajo mis manos  
Podrán estarse quietas.  
Que siempre como topos arañarán la tierra  
En medio de las sombras estrujadas y prietas.*

*Arrójame semillas. Yo quiero que se enraícen  
En la greda amarilla de mis huesos menguados.  
¡Por la parda escalera de las raíces vivas  
Yo subiré a mirarte en los lirios morados! (L, 47-48)*

The certainty of immortality with the same essential characteristics and feelings she has now, serves as a balm for the dire thought of leaving life's inexhaustible feast. And the horror of death ("yo le tengo horror a la muerte", R, 45) is mitigated by the comforting thought that her body, when put into the earth, may furnish the fertilizer to nurture some huge tree which will increase her present stature a hundredfold (R, 45). And as she feels her muscles, her hair, her shoulders, she is again filled with the joy that she is now touching that which someday may become the branches of a tree, the tender straws that line a cozy nest, the earth that fills a furrow that is warm—like woman's flesh (R, 45).

Her life in the flesh will terminate at death; but her spirit will live on to reap the joys and blessings that nature, in its insatiable bounty, will continue to bestow. And so, in the lovely purple lilies, in the gracefully-turned vase, in the happy atoms that go dancing along enchanting paths, in the vivid, yet small flame that will comfort the lover in his long hours of desolation, and in so many other ways, she will continue to live on—for death does not annihilate; it merely *transforms* . . .

But these spiritual joys are for later. Now there is in her a constant avidity to take a palpable part "in the feast." And so she drinks in joy and love and life with the furor, the fervor and the fruition of one who knows that

*The Bird of Time has but a little way  
To flutter—and the Bird is on the wing . . .*

of one who knows that someday she will be forever still and silent—"in perpetual repose"—under the black earth, while life above her continues to buzz like a drunken bee:

*Ha de llegar un día en que he de estar me quieta,  
 ¡Ay, por siempre, por siempre!  
 Con las manos cruzadas y apagados los ojos,  
 Con los oídos sordos y con la boca muda,  
 Y los pies andariegos en reposo perpetuo  
 Bajo la tierra negra*

.....  
*Mientras encima mío se oirá zumbiar la vida  
 Como una abeja ebria (L, 92)*

of one who knows that her mouth, her hands, her hair, will some day all have turned to the proverbial ashes and dust:

*No codicies mi boca. Mi boca es de ceniza  
 Y es un hueco sonido de campana mi risa.*

*No me oprimas las manos. Son de polvo mis manos,  
 Y al estrecharlas tocas comidas de gusanos.*

*No trences mis cabellos. Mis cabellos son tierra  
 Con la que han de nutrirse las plantas  
 de la sierra.*

("Laceria", L, 103)

And she who is so alive wonders if the dead are content to sleep on without interruption; or if tired of their unending rest they have a longing for movement, for noise, for *verticality*:

*¡Oh, muertos para quienes el silencio es enorme  
 Y no se acaba nunca! ¿Será bueno dormir  
 Como ellos, sin nada que les aje el reposo?  
 ¿Se está bien allá abajo o desearán salir*

*Un día a correr campos, a buscar a los hombres,  
 El movimiento, el grito, la verticalidad,  
 Cansados del descanso sin tregua, llenos de ansia  
 Por la inquietud ardiente, viva, de la ciudad?*

("Cementerio campesino", L, 177-178)

Yet there are times—rare times—when tired of this eternal wishing, hoping, dreaming that is life, she is beset by a wild longing to rest; by an unbounded desire to stretch out in the dust and be only dust:

*¡Oh, este eterno anhelar!  
 ¡Oh, esta eterna inquietud!  
 ¡Como a veces te sueño,  
 Sueño del ataúd!*

*Hasta el cuerpo me duele  
 De soñar y soñar.  
 Muerte, anúlame. Hoy tengo  
 Un ansia de reposar . . .*

.....

*Esta noche la tierra  
Es un imán tenaz.  
¡Oh, tenderme en el polvo!  
¡Oh, ser polvo y no más!*

.....  
*¡Oh, ser polvo, ser tierra,  
Disgregarse, volver  
A la nada, que ignora  
La fatiga de ser.*

("Cansancio", L, 159-160)

And there are others when, tortured by the thought of old age—when youth and beauty are no more—she thinks of the clemency of death. The slow approach of an old woman evokes these mournful thoughts, as she wonders if she, too, so fresh and young, will some day have those deep ridges on her cheeks; if the terse, rich ivory of her dark body will break into those same sinuous pleats. What will happen to her constant desire to walk through woods and meadows and to "the sonorous bell of her happiness?" Will they be transformed into this same sadness—into this quiet anguish? Will she be able *to live* without the pride of being *strong* and *young* and *desired*? Oh, Lord—she cries—why can't the legend of the Fountain of Youth be true? (CF, 128-129).

Knowing, then, that time is at a premium, she urges the lover to take her *now* "while it is still early"; while her flesh is still fragrant and soft with the dahlias and the nards of youth; for later his desire may have no echo of response—like an offering placed upon a silent tomb:

*Tómame ahora que aún es temprano  
Y que llevo dalias nuevas en la mano.*

*Tómame ahora que aún es sombría  
Esta taciturna cabellera mía.*

*Ahora, que tengo la carne olorosa,  
Y los ojos limpios y la piel de rosa.*

.....  
*Después . . . ¡ah yo sé  
Que ya nada de eso más tarde tendré!*

*Que entonces inútil será tu deseo  
Como ofrenda puesta sobre un mausoleo.*

*¡Tómame ahora que aún es temprano  
Y que tengo rica de nardos la mano!*

("La hora", L, 17-18)

And so she loses no time in enjoying to the full the sweetness which each fleeting moment brings. And she gives herself to the lover joyfully and without reserve—offering her lithe, brown body "like a gift of love."



The naturalness with which she speaks of this love, and the constant analogies with nature—which lend it an idyllic note—obviate any feeling of crudeness or lust that one might sense in poetry of a more “sophisticated” type. Her reiterated claim to purity and chastity (“soy casta como Diana”), expressed in paradoxical terms (“puro impudor”, “casta impudicia”), is abetted by critics who laud her “castísima desnudez espiritual” (Unamuno), her “desnuda virginidad” (Torres Bodet), her “casto impudor” (Ballesteros de Martos). And so she can with all frankness speak of

. . . la suprema delicia  
De la más casta impudicia  
Dormir desnuda en tus brazos (R, 25)

for she knows that her love—like her soul—is always tendered with “the pure impurity of a fruit, a star or a flower.”

Seldom is their passion brought within the orbits of a room, for her dislike—one might almost say *distrust*—of anything “civilized,” and her almost religious cult for nature make her always seek “unfettered love in rustic peace.”<sup>1</sup> This results in so close an identification of love with nature that many of the sensations she experiences in one or the other are at times so fused—or even *confused*—that she can, with all naturalness, say: “he mordido manzanas y he besado tus labios” . . . implying that the sensation derived from biting apples was comparable, similar, or perhaps *identical* to that occasioned by kissing the lover on the lips! This thought is borne out by frequent allusions to a kiss falling upon her lips as would a fruit, and producing a like sensation:

Donde una tarde alguien puso en mi boca  
Como un fruto extraordinario  
El primer beso amoroso (R, 27)

Sensación de agua viva y moras negras  
Me dió tu boca, amante

. . . . .

Y me cayó tu beso entre los labios  
Como un fruto maduro de la selva . . . (R, 43)

The body and the kiss, like water, infuse a freshness that allays the burning thirst of love. And so when the lover is parched by desire, she, the good Samaritan, offers the live fount of her body:

La sed era en su boca como un largo rubí,  
Y yo el cántaro vivo de mi cuerpo le di (L, 90)

while for her thirst there is no greater comfort than the refreshing sweetness of his kiss:

<sup>1</sup> “Vida aldeana” evokes an idyllic picture of love which she likens to “a verse of Virgil lived before the luminous stars”. (L, 139-140).

*Tu beso fué en mis labios  
De un dulzor refrescante.*

.....  
*Y me cayó tu beso entre los labios  
Como . . .*

*. . . un lavado guijarro del arroyo (R, 43)*

All nature seems to breathe love, and the lover's presence is felt in the strong, yet tender embrace of the wind, in the fragrant warmth of the green-carpeted earth, in the caressing waters of the river; his lips in the turgid sweetness of the rustic fruits; his fire in the burning copper of the sun that bends all vegetation to its will.

This woman whose breast, as she says, harbors a live coal instead of a heart ("un ascua viva encendida en lugar de corazón"), at times loves with ardor, with passion, with a certain savageness that knows no moral bonds or restrictions. And like Delmira Agustini who felt that the lover's soul and hers were tied in an unyielding knot which Destiny and the Fates could not undo, Juana de Ibarbourou also says:

*Mi alma frente a tu alma se ha hecho un nudo  
Apretado y sombrío.*

.....  
*Y es un abrazo inacabable y largo  
Que ni la muerte romperá.*

.....  
*Mi raíz se ha trenzado a tus raíces  
Y cuando quieras desatar el nudo,  
Sentirás que te duele en carne viva  
Y que en mi herida brota sangre tuya!*

("Fusión", L, 87-88).

It is then that the kiss, which most often is wholesome and refreshing, becomes an insatiable, flame-devouring fire; a harrowing life-sipping thirst—a kiss that bites flesh and mouth and soul, opening a wound through which she feels life fleeing.

But most often she is in a far gentler and less tempestuous mood, and is filled with the need of being all things for the lover; of giving him all—her youth, her dreams, herself:

*Y te di el olor,  
De todas mis dalias y nardos en flor.*

*Y te di el tesoro,  
De las hondas minas de mis sueños de oro.*

*Y te di la miel,  
Del panal moreno que finge mi piel.*

*Y todo te di! (L, 23)*

for rather than possessive, she wants to be subservient to him.

One of the most touching poems in this tenor is "Enredadera",

where she says that for the rich privilege of being always at his side she will be merely a fragrance or a shadow. She will be silence itself, if he wants silence, and when he returns from the street—worn, bitter, thirsty—her body will be there for him, like the clear water of the river. Her arm will be a pillow of fresh clover; her hands, refreshing to his burning brow. There is a sort of *tameness* in her then, and a certain humility which is ingratiating, as she chooses the meeker attitudes that a woman so often likes to assume in love. This feeling of humbleness—of complete surrender—is akin to that of weakness, of “smallness”, that she feels next to “him” who is aptly the strong one, the protector, in whose company she feels no fear: “Contigo en el nido no sé lo que es miedo”.

Her poetry is marvelously alive and fresh and fragrant. It is redolent of sweet-smelling grass and newly-hoed earth; of thyme and moss and wind-swept wheat; of violets and marguerites, dahlias and nards; of fruits, of sunshine, and of spring. For Juana de Ibarbourou has a keen, almost primitive, sense of smell and is constantly referring to the many and varied odors that greet her—“like a friendly dog”—as she walks through the woods or fields, or even at home as the delightful aroma of fruits and flowers permeates her rooms.

All these rustic odors are transmitted to her brown, lithe body and to her dark hair which she loves to spread “like a black wing” on the lover’s knees:

*Mi cuerpo está impregnado del aroma ardoroso  
De los pastos maduros. Mi cabello sombrero  
Esparce, al destrenzarlo, olor a sol y a heno,  
A salvia, a yerbabuena y a flores de centeno.*

.....

*Y huelo a hierba clara nacida en la mañana!* (L, 130)

*Tiene aún mi epidermis morena,  
No sé qué fragancias de trigo emparvado* (R, 29)

And that is why she tells him that he can kiss a thousand women but not one will give him that “impression of rustic love,” that “impression of rivulet and forest” that she does.

Accustomed to the boundless freedom of fields, meadows, open roads, woods; to the joys of unlimited wind and rain and sunshine; to the pungent, invigorating or delicate fragrance of fruits, plants and flowers; to the caressing song of birds, crickets, brooks, of her native Melo, in the city she somehow feels like “a wild plant in a conservatory.” But, as she says, all the sweet memories of the past are in her soul, and in her blood; and so, in spite of the years that have gone by, she does not forget . . . Nor can she, for there is always something—a word plethoric with reminiscence (*selva, pinos . . .*); the fresh and healthful smell of



pasture grass, or the balsamic one of amber-colored oranges; the crickets' or cicadas' song at siesta-time or in the summer eve; a butterfly in flight; a passing cart filled with golden sheaves of wheat—that summons up "remembrance of things past."<sup>1</sup>

There are times when she seems to find quiet contentment and serenity in the steady rhythm of her present life. But she is too restless of spirit—too anguished at the sign of immobility in any form—to be long satisfied with "sterile peace." And so she begins to envy "the traveling destiny of the winds." A violent desire for change, a constant urge to rid herself of the strangling hold of monotony—most often externalized in a longing for travel—takes possession of her.

This wanderlust, also rooted, undoubtedly, in her dread of immobility, comes into evidence in the earlier books. But it is not until *La rosa de los vientos* that one feels its merciless and relentless grip. For it is no longer a caprice then—as it may have been some time before—but a spiritual necessity to set out in search of new stimuli to enliven her youth, aged prematurely in the stifling air of sameness; a pressing urge to find

<sup>1</sup> "Selva: he aquí una palabra húmeda, verde, fresca, rumorosa, profunda . . . ¡qué palabra para mí tan llena de reminiscencias! Huele a eucaliptus, a álamos, a sauces, a grama; suena a viento, a agua que corre, a pájaros que cantan y pían, a roce de insectos y croar de sapitos verdes; evoca redondeles de sol sobre la tierra, frutas silvestres de una dulzura áspera, caravanas de hormigas rojas cargadas de hojitas tiernas, penumbra verdosa y fresca, soledad. ¡Oh, Dios mío, evoca mis quince años y toda mi alegría sana, inconsciente y salvaje!" (CF, 11-12)

*Yo digo ¡pinos! y siento  
Que se me aclara el alma.  
Yo digo ¡pinos! y en mis oídos  
Rumorea la selva.*

*Yo digo ¡pinos! y por mis labios pasa  
La frescura de las fuentes salvajes.*

.....  
*Yo digo ¡pinos! y me veo morena,  
Quinceabrileña,*

*Bajo uno que era amplio como una casa . . .* (R, 27)

Ha pasado ante mí un hombre inclinado bajo un gran haz de pasto maduro . . . Por un instante un olor fresco y saludable se esparció en el camino y flotó en torno mío, llenándome de recuerdos . . . (CF, 75)

Mi hijo ha cazado un grillo y viene a traérmelo porque alguien le ha dicho que, guardándolo bajo una copa de cristal, recibiremos una alegría. ¿Una alegría? Entonces, pequeño mago chillón y negro, llévame con mi niño a aquel sendero que yo cruzaba todas las tardecitas cuando volvía de la escuela a mi casa. Muchos grillos cantaban entre los pastos del ribazo y yo hacía el camino abstraída y encantada, con una inconsciente y honda poesía en mi corazón. (CF, 23)

Una mariposita pequeña y amarilla ha venido a revoltear en torno de la luz . . .

—¿De dónde vienes, pequeñita? ¿Has estado acaso en aquel bosque rumoroso que yo recorría encantada y sin miedo cuando era niña? ¿Bebiste tal vez una minúscula gota de agua en aquella laguna toda bordada de juncos y de mimbres, que hay cerca del bosque de que te hablo? (CF, 15)

*Me ha quedado clavada en los ojos,  
La visión de ese carro de trigo,  
Que cruzó rechinante y pesado,  
Sembrando de espigas el recto camino.*

*¡No pretendas, ahora, que ría!  
¡Tú no sabes en que hondos recuerdos  
Estoy abstraída!* (R, 29)

the road that may lead to a new life, to a new land of hope where she can discard the garb of sorrow that now hangs heavy upon her and don anew the long-sought, radiant one of joy.

The ships—small, live worlds—had long sent her mute invitations from afar. But the Atlantic, a friendly hand that opens to receive all travelers and sailors, for her is a clenched fist, and has no roads. This ocean, she well knows, will never balance on its undulating back the boat that would take her from this small land of hers to those others—wondrous ones!—of which her “motionless youth” and her melancholy dream. She looks at it, then, as she would a fruit into which she will never bite, or as a fertile field that she will never reap (“Atlántico”, RV, 93-94).

Sitting alone on the shore—among the shadows—she devours with avid eyes the divine feast denied to her. And the realization that she “bites an impossible desire” rends from her that “cutting cry” with which she hopes to sever the cable that binds her to one land—to *only one land!*—of which she knows even the dust that dances on the wind; but her vain cry falls limp upon the sea, like a wounded gull (“El grito”, RV, 72-73).

But if she dwells on the miracles of travel to a soul crushed by routine, she also writes, at much greater length, of the simple joys of seeing familiar scenes, familiar plants, flowers, insects . . .; of homely duties and motherly cares; of her garden, her trees, her well, her native river.

In a poem which sounds truer depths than those in which she sang of other horizons, other shores, she speaks of the familiar aromas that greet her as she follows near-by roads, and of burying her face among the flowers “de olor cordial y antiguo”. And, suddenly, as she says, “all the lies of the sea become clear.” For in common with other Americans who, like her, have not a sailor’s soul, she loves the land:

*La montaña, la pampa, la colina y la selva,  
La antiplanicie brava y los llanos verdeantes  
Donde pasta la vaca y galopa el bisonte . . .* (R, 67)

Returning home she feels the deep joys of “reconquest.”

All her poems are a paean to this brilliant, fragrant land of hers:

*¡Qué brillantes y qué bien huelen  
Mis tierras de América . . .* (RV, 86)

And she herself, in her exuberance, in her sensuousness, in her zest for life, in her fire, in her fondness for light, is an ardent fragment of that huge, colorful tropical expanse—“todo el trópico de oro, de escarlata, de añil”—which knows the burning fire of midday, the long and restless

twilights, the vivid dawns, and that odor of forests which gallops on the wind to kindle dreams and desire . . . (RV, 102).

The reminiscences of other authors one may discern in the works of Juana de Ibarbourou—in her concepts, in her themes, in her images even—are due, undoubtedly, more to analogy than to direct influence. For her literary antecedents, as has been pointed out, may have been Omar Kháyyám, Ronsard, Anacreon—of whom she had probably never heard when she wrote those poems that bear their stamp. It is true one can find similarities—too obvious to be accidental or casual—between certain lines of hers and others of Delmira Agustini's.<sup>1</sup> But it is also true that there is much in common between the general tone and concept of her poems and some of Anna de Noailles, of whom, it is claimed, she never heard until striking resemblances in their work were noted. They have many things in common: their love of life, their dread of death and of old age, their passion for nature, their sensuousness and narcissism, their constant concern for love. But the Comtesse, as Zum Felde says, is as typical of the Old World with its culture, its finesse, its mundanity, its sophistication and refinement, as Juana is of the New, with its freshness, its naiveté, its spontaneity, its artlessness.

Physically both petite and alluring (the Comtesse more *femme du monde*; Juana more ingenuous), they differ greatly in personality and background. One had education and wealth and travel, and the company of outstanding men of letters; the other was a simple country girl—unread, practically untaught—who felt lost even in Montevideo. Yet, in spite of all this, their themes, their thoughts, and even their modes of expression are often surprisingly alike.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Juana reiterates Delmira's desire for a "raza nueva" in almost identical words:

*Espera, no te duermas. Esta noche  
Somos acaso, la raíz suprema  
De donde debe germinar mañana  
El tronco bello de una raza nueva* (R, 14)

Many of her images and expressions re-echo Delmira's:

*Y en el triángulo estéril que es hoy mi corazón  
Sólo ha brotado el hongo de la desolación* (L, 170)  
*O caza las arañas del tedio, o traga amargos  
Hongos de soledad* (Agustini, I, 55)  
. . . ¿No sientes  
*Como me nutro de tu misma sombra?* (L, 87)  
. . . algún alma . . . fué mía  
*Se nutrió de mi sombra* (Agustini, II, 34)  
*Silencio en nuestros labios una rosa ha florido* (L, 7)  
*Y el silencio es una rosa  
Sobre su pico de fuego* (Agustini, I, 83)

<sup>2</sup> As we have given a rather full analysis of Juana de Ibarbourou's themes we do not deem it necessary to repeat here some of the thoughts or lines that will, inevitably, recall these of Anna de Noailles:

*Je vais aller goûter et prendre dans mes mains  
Les bois, les sources d'eaux, la haie et ses épines  
Le coeur innombrable,* p. 68



Anna de Noailles' horizon—even the physical one—is far vaster than Juana de Ibarbourou's. She is constantly evoking the many coun-

*Baiser l'air, goûter l'eau glissante, avoir le coeur  
Simple et chaud comme un fruit qui donne son odeur*

*Ibid.*, p. 81.

*Je suis pleine d'élan, d'amour, de bonne odeur*

*Les éblouissements*, p. 268.

*Je sais tous les secrets des plantes et des eaux*

*L'ombre des jours*, p. 68.

*Etre dans la nature ainsi qu'un arbre humain*

*Le coeur innombrable*, p. 73.

*Et j'ai tenu l'odeur des saisons dans mes mains*

*Ibid.*, p. 7.

*Mais l'odeur de l'été reste dans tes cheveux*

*Ibid.*, p. 76.

*. . . ivre d'air, d'azur, de vent, de sel . . .*

*Les éblouissements*, p. 103.

*Ivre d'espoir, ivre d'amour, ivre d'été . . .*

*Ibid.*, p. 394.

*. . . ivre d'odeur, de soleil et d'azur*

*Ibid.*, p. 398.

(Juana de Ibarbourou had said: "Estoy ebria de tarde, de viento y primavera", R, 57).

*Je demeure joyeuse, ardente et désirable*

*Le coeur innombrable*, p. 107.

*Que je vous aime, douce Vie*

*Les éblouissements*, p. 159.

*Mourante, je dirai qu'il faut jouir et vivre*

*Ibid.*, p. 5.

*Déjà la vie ardente incline vers le soir,*

*Respire ta jeunesse,*

*Le temps est court qui va de la vigne au pressoir,*

*De l'aube au jour qui baisse.*

*Le coeur innombrable*, p. 185.

*Pourtant tu t'en iras un jour de moi, Jeunesse.*

*Tu t'en iras, tenant l'Amour entre tes bras.*

*L'ombre des jours*, p. 3.

*Tu dis que c'est l'heure de vivre,*

*Que le moment de vivre est court . . .*

*Les éblouissements*, p. 14.

(The "tempus fugit" theme strikes a more personal—and dolorous—note in the poetesses who set so much store by their youth and desirability. They follow, to the letter, Robert Herrick's advice "To the virgins": "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may" . . . and mindfully heed Ronsard's admonition:

*Vivez si m'en croyez; n'attendez à demain:*

*Cueillez dès aujourd'hui les roses de la vie.)*

*Ne plus jamais vous voir, ô lumière des cieux!*

*Hélas! je n'étais pas faite pour être morte . . .*

*Les éblouissements*, p. 52.

*On songe au temps qui fuit, aux plus jeunes années*

*Ibid.*, p. 3.

*Avoir quinze ans, rêver dans l'herbe haute et chaude*

*Où le soleil s'ébat . . .*

*Ibid.*, p. 15.

*J'étais contente alors . . .*

*.....*

*Je me disais . . .*

*Ce sera tout un jour à courir dans le thym,*

*Près du merisier rose et près de la cigale,*

*Tout un jour à goûter la feuille et le pétale . . .*

*Ibid.*, p. 374.

*Je me souviens des soirs en mai sur ma terrasse,*

*L'odeur d'un oranger engourdissait l'espace . . .*

*Ibid.*, p. 4.

tries, cities, landscapes—of Europe, of the Orient—that she has seen. Her desire for travel, therefore, although repeatedly sounded, lacks the poignancy and eagerness that one discerns, for instance, in *La rosa de los vientos*, for it is merely a longing to revisit familiar places, and not a spiritual need as in Juana.

The author of *Les éblouissements* makes innumerable and repeated allusions to writers—past and present—with whom she is familiar; and her poems abound in literary and mythological references—all indicative of a wide and heterogeneous culture, but which, at times, seem superfluous and cumbersome. Juana de Ibarbourou does not do this—for obvious reasons—and one cannot help thinking that for the type of poetry she writes this lack of learning is almost an asset.

The Comtesse de Noailles has a wider range of themes and interests, and yet, perhaps because she wrote so much more, she seems far more repetitious even than Juana de Ibarbourou whose insistence on the use of certain thoughts, words and expressions has often been criticized. The author of *Raíz salvaje* seems, therefore, by comparison, to give us the same themes simplified—reduced to the essentials—and not unduly ornate as they sometimes appear in the more effusive verse of the French poetess.

Because we know the Comtesse to be a woman of the world her "primitiveness" seems, at times, almost an affectation. She is, in all ways, far more experienced than Juana. In love, her desire and her pleasure are keener and wiser—based on a recollection of repeated voluptuous and sensual joys—and her surrender lacks the "purity," one might say, of that of the poetess of Melo, who never had cause, as did Anna de Noailles, to evoke her innocence with nostalgia . . .

Juana likewise differs from the other major poetesses of Spanish America, for her poems do not disclose those erotic yearnings, dissatisfactions and contradictions one so readily and commonly discerns in their piteous cries. She needs love for a happy, normal, healthy existence; and she is fortunate in having found it. But to her it is never that unbounded passion which to Delmira Agustini was "greater than life, greater than dreams"; nor that fruitless chastity that crucified María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira; nor that fever of possession that burned within Gabriela Mistral; nor that torturing emptiness that hounded Alfonsina Storni . . . And her reactions to the lover are always natural, sound; for he is *the end*, the goal, of her yearning, and not merely *the means* of getting to the pith of that inexplicable something which is love.

In all ways simple—without phobias, without complexes—she does not feel frustrated or misunderstood. Nor does she ask of the lover any but those things most easily granted and mutually desired. And she is willing to give as much as she demands, if not more. In this, as in many other ways: in her coquetry, in her "weakness," in the prepon-

derance of the sensory, the instinctive, rather than the rational, mental attitudes, she is the most truly feminine of the major poetesses of Spanish America; for it is said that in those qualities lies the true essence of femininity.



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## ABBREVIATIONS

- A—Atenea. Concepción, Chile.
- AFFE—Anales de la Facultad de Filosofía y Educación. (Universidad de Chile). Santiago, Chile.
- ALi—Argentina Libre. Buenos Aires.
- Amer—América. Quito.
- AmerH—América. Revista de la Asociación de Escritores y Artistas Americanos. Habana.
- AmM—American Mercury. New York.
- AndQ—Andean Quarterly. Santiago de Chile.
- Ari—Ariel. San José, Costa Rica.
- AyL—Arte y Letras. México.
- BAbr—Books Abroad. Norman, Oklahoma.
- BCGBT—Boletín del Colegio de Graduados de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras. Buenos Aires.
- BHi—Bulletin Hispanique. Bordeaux.
- BiblosMex—Biblos. México.
- BPAU—Bulletin of the Pan-American Union. Washington, D. C.
- BUPan—Boletín de la Unión Panamericana. Washington, D. C.
- Cal—El Callao. Callao, Perú.
- Cartel—Cartel. Montevideo.
- CasaM—La Casa de Montalvo. Ambato, Ecuador.
- CBibl—El Consultor Bibliográfico. Barcelona.
- CerM—Cervantes. Madrid.
- Colombo—Colombo. Roma.
- Confer—Conferencias. Buenos Aires.
- Cosmopolis—Cosmópolis. Madrid.
- Cronica—Crónica. Guadalajara, México.
- CSM—Christian Science Monitor. Boston.
- CuC—Cuba Contemporánea. Habana.
- Cus—Cúspide. Mercedita, Habana.
- CVen—Cultura Venezolana. Caracas.
- EH—El Espectador Habanero. Habana.
- EscC—La Escuela Costarricense. San José, Costa Rica.
- Esp—España. Madrid.
- Estr—La Estrella. Linares, Chile.
- EyA—España y América. Madrid.
- Fam—Familia. Santiago de Chile.
- FrAm—France-Amérique. Paris.
- Gau—Le Gaulois. Paris.
- GLit—La Gaceta Literaria. Madrid.
- Gra—Grafos. Habana.
- HAHR—The Hispanic American Historical Review. Durham, North Carolina.
- Hiper—Hiperión. Montevideo.
- HispCal—Hispania. Stanford, Cal.
- HMex—El Heraldo. México.
- Hoy—Hoy. Santiago de Chile.
- Insu—Insula. Buenos Aires.
- IntAm—Inter-América. New York.
- LexJ—The Lexington Journal. Kentucky.
- LitAr—La Literatura Argentina. Buenos Aires.
- Lyceum—Lyceum. Habana.
- LyP—El Libro y el Pueblo. México.
- Meg—Megáfono. Buenos Aires.

- Merc—El Mercurio. Santiago de Chile.  
 MLF—The Modern Language Forum. Los Angeles, Cal.  
 MP—Mercurio Peruano. Lima.  
 MuI—El Mundo Ilustrado. México.  
 MuMex—El Mundo. México.  
 Nac—La Nación. Buenos Aires.  
 NacC—La Nación. Santiago de Chile.  
 NAm—Nuestra América. Buenos Aires.  
 NAR—The North American Review. New York.  
 ND—La Nueva Democracia. New York.  
 Ner—Nervio. Buenos Aires.  
 Nos—Nosotros. Buenos Aires.  
 NuE—Nueva Era. Quito.  
 Peg—Pegaso. Montevideo.  
 Perf—Perfiles. Ciudad Trujillo, Rep. Dom.  
 PlMon.—La Pluma. Montevideo.  
 PLore—Poet Lore. Boston.  
 PrBA—La Prensa. Buenos Aires.  
 Proa—Proa. Buenos Aires.  
 PrTex—La Prensa. San Antonio, Texas.  
 RABA—La Revista Americana de Buenos Aires. Buenos Aires.  
 RAml—Revue de l'Amérique Latine. Paris.  
 RBC—Revista Bimestre Cubana. Habana.  
 RCChile—La Revista Católica de Santiago de Chile. Santiago, Chile.  
 RCM—Revista Contemporánea. Monterrey, México.  
 RCub—Revista de Cuba. Habana.  
 RdE—Revista de las Españas. Madrid.  
 REd—Revista de Educación. La Plata, Rep. Arg.  
 REdN—Revista de Educación Nacional. Santiago de Chile.  
 Reno—Renovación. Buenos Aires.  
 RepAm—Repertorio Americano. San José, Costa Rica.  
 REsp—Raza Española. Madrid.  
 RevChil—Revista Chilena. Santiago de Chile.  
 RevCu—Revista Cubana. Habana.  
 RevIb—Revista Iberoamericana. Organó del Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana. México, D. F.  
 RFem—Revista Fémína. Medellín, Colombia.  
 RHM—Revista Hispánica Moderna. New York.  
 RMon—Revue Mondiale. Paris.  
 RNac—Revista Nacional. Montevideo.  
 RNC—Revista Nacional de Cultura. Caracas.  
 ROB—La Renaissance d'Occident. Bruxelles.  
 RPl—Río de la Plata. Montevideo.  
 RR—Revista de Revistas. México.  
 RRaza—Revista de la Raza. Madrid.  
 RY—Revista de Yucatán. Mérida, Yucatán, México.  
 Social—Social. Habana.  
 Sol—El Sol. Madrid.  
 Suc—Suceso. Santiago de Chile.  
 Sur—Sur. Buenos Aires.  
 SurC—El Sur. Concepción, Chile.  
 Tall—Taller. México, D. F.  
 TresL—3. Lima.  
 UA—Universidad de Antioquia. Medellín, Colombia.  
 Universal—El Universal. México, D. F.  
 UniversalCar—El Universal. Caracas.  
 WC—Woman Citizen. New York  
 ZZ—Zig-Zag. Santiago de Chile.



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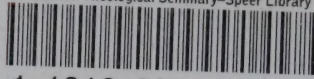




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